

BYRON AND SHELLEY AS DRAMATIC POETS



by

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TO MOTHER AND DAD

PREFACE

My appreciation of the poetry of Byron and Shelley began some years ago when I read some of the lyrics of these poets for a general course in high school English. My interest in their dramatic compositions was aroused last semester when, under the direction of Professor J.H. Nelson, I made a study of the English drama from its beginnings to the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

In the following chapters my purpose has been to show the nature and importance of the dramatic productions of Byron and Shelley as compared with those of their contemporaries, to discover what light a study of their dramas will cast on the characters and the literary qualities of the two men, and to point out and account for likenesses and differences. In order to do this I have attempted to show the condition of the English drama in the early nineteenth century, to determine Byron's and Shelley's motive and preparation for dramatic writing, to indicate the circumstances which influenced the composition of each of their plays, and to include the more important critical estimates of the pieces.

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CHAPTER I

The Drama of an Undramatic Age

The condition of the English stage during the first quarter of the nineteenth century was peculiarly interesting. Rarely before had there been a better opportunity for good drama, and seldom had there been poorer playwrights to respond to that opportunity.

As to the general attitude toward the theatre, there is abundant evidence of a strong tendency in the age to be dramatic. When in 1809 a fire destroyed Drury Lane, the theatre was immediately rebuilt; not long afterwards improvements were made at Covent Garden; and new play houses were erected to meet the demands of the public, which showed an eager interest in play productions. Furthermore, there had perhaps never before been so many good actors at one time. Among the most notable players at Covent Garden during the first twenty-five years of the century were the famous Kemble brothers, John and Charles, their sister Mrs. Sarah Siddons, "Dolly" Jordan, Eliza O'Neil, and William Macready.¹ Drury Lane boasted Robert Elliston, John Bannister, and Edmund Kean, perhaps the most successful actor the English stage has known with the exception of Garrick.²

It seems very strange indeed that under such conditions dramatic composition failed to inspire the interest of the leading figures of the

1. Bates, E.S., A Study of Shelley's Drama The Cenci, p. 35.

2. "Edmund Kean," Encyclopedia Britannica (11th ed.) XV, p. 705.

period. Few writers of any note, however, were interested in writing for the stage. Consequently, worthy original productions for presentation were almost entirely lacking. An observation made by Lord Byron during this period illustrates the condition of the drama:

When I belonged to the Drury Lane Committee, and was one of the stage committee of management, the number of plays upon the shelf was about five hundred. Conceiving that amongst them there must be some of merit, in person and by proxy, I caused an investigation. I do not think that of those which I saw there was one which could be tolerated.³

Early in the century French melodrama was introduced in England, and straightway became so popular that for more than twenty-five years that type of play practically dominated the English stage, with sentimental productions imported from Germany and sensational creations of native origin. The theatre of that time lacked the national pride and power exemplified in Elizabethan drama. It no longer reflected the national life, and independently of life art cannot exist.⁴

While the leaders of English literature were well aware of this condition, and although they felt that the stage was in a state of degradation, still they made no enthusiastic efforts to revive it. Their interests were centered in other fields of literary activity, and when they incidentally turned to dramatic composition it was with an air of condescension which certainly was not conducive to the production of

3. Fitzgerald, P., A New History of the English Stage, II, p. 385.

4. Chew, S.C., The Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 2.

artistically perfect drama. Had they made an effort to master dramatic technique, it seems altogether reasonable that Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Byron, and Shelley, with all their rich literary talent, might have mastered the craft well enough so that, even as a literary by-product, their contribution to English romantic drama might have been reasonably successful on the stage. As it was, these men knew practically nothing of technical theatrical requirements, and the few plays they wrote were better suited to the "closet" than to the stage.

In order to estimate the place of Byron and Shelley as dramatists, it might be well to consider briefly the dramatic works of their contemporaries, especially of those men whose primary interest was poetry -- namely, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats.

Wordsworth's one play, "The Borders", was the result of three years' hard work,⁵ but when he submitted it to the manager of Covent Garden in 1797 for production it was rejected. Its absurd characterization, its exaggerated plot, its highly sentimental style, and its complete lack of vigorous scenes of action made it impossible for the stage. Even as a closet drama it is wanting in interest. Wordsworth meant it to be a psychological play, a drama of feeling rather than of action; but besides the defects that the play is wanting in local color and that its morbid theme is unnatural, the entire plot of the play lacks sufficient motivation.

5. Wordsworth, Christopher, Memoirs of William Wordsworth, I, pp. 96-97, 113, as cited by Bates, E.S., A Study of Shelley's Drama The Cenci, p. 141.

Coleridge came nearer to attaining a dramatic reputation than did Wordsworth. In 1797 his drama Osorio was rejected by Drury Lane because the manager's "sole objection," as Coleridge later complained, was "the obscurity of the three last acts."⁶ Fifteen years later, however, at Byron's suggestion, Coleridge altered the play, and in 1813 it was produced at Drury Lane under the name Remorse. That the revised drama was successful is indicated by the facts that Coleridge received four hundred pounds for it, that it was produced a number of times in later years, and that, when it was printed, a second and third edition were in immediate demand.⁷ The plot and characters of Remorse are more consistent than those in The Borderers, but the play is like Wordsworth's in that it places an undue emphasis on emotion. Poetically speaking, it is inferior to The Borderers.

Notwithstanding the comparative success of Remorse, Coleridge did not attempt the dramatic form again until in 1815 when he wrote Zapolya. Drury Lane agreed to accept it if he would make certain alterations in it. He became discouraged with it, however, and failed to make the suggested changes. Consequently, Zapolya was never produced. The characters in the play are mere puppets and the situations are incompletely and ineffectually drawn.

In 1819 Keats wrote a play, Otho the Great, in collaboration with a certain Charles Brown, but, although it was accepted by Drury Lane,

6. Bates, E.S., op. cit., p. 42.

7. Ibid., p. 42.

it was never produced. The plot of the play was constructed according to conventional romantic models, and the characters and situations are almost as improbable and unnatural as those in The Borderers and Zapolya. After finishing Otho the Great, Keats began a drama on King Stephen, but left only a fragment consisting of about 170 lines.

Two lesser literary figures who made attempts at dramatic composition were Henry Hart Milman, whose Fazio produced in 1815 was, according to Chew, the success of the season,⁸ and Maturin, whose Bertram, Bates says, was the triumph of 1816.⁹ Neither apparently accomplished anything in the field of the drama aside from these two plays.

Apart from those whose chief work was done in other fields than drama, Joanna Baillie's name is the only one of importance in tragedy writing. Her plays, like those of the romantic poets, lack action, and are concerned with the portrayal of moods of a sentimental cast which are not truly dramatic.¹⁰

Thus we see that the entire group had certain deficiencies in common. None of them had a technical knowledge of theatrical requirements. They were ignorant of the fundamental nature of dramatic characterization and situation. They allowed their plays to abound in long speeches, soliloquies, irrelevant scenes, and leisurely developed plots. All of them were inspired by the romantic mood, and the dramas which they wrote were tragedies of emotion rather than of will -- plays to be read

8. Chew, S.C., op. cit., p. 13.

9. Bates, E.S. op. cit, p. 40.

10. Vaughan, C.E., The Romantic Revolt, p. 91.

rather than acted.

Such was the condition of the drama when Byron and Shelley decided to try their skill at dramatic composition.

CHAPTER II

Byron's Motive and Preparation for Dramatic Writing

When Byron essayed dramatic composition he was the most popular lyric poet in England, and his fame on the continent was in its ascendancy. Lyric writing was his forte. He did his best work in subjective composition because he was always chiefly concerned with his own concrete personality. Why then did he attempt the drama --- one of the most objective of literary forms?

Various circumstances might be offered as an explanation of Byron's motive in writing plays: the fact that there was a strong general interest in drama and that each of the great poets of the time wrote at least one drama during his literary career, Byron's natural desire for applause, and his interest in the theatre. Careful study shows, however, that the poet's reaction to these same circumstances was negative rather than positive, and consequently that they cannot be offered as motivating influences.

Byron was not the type of person to turn to the writing of plays merely because it was the fashionable thing to do. In fact, the contemporary drama exerted a strong negative influence on him.¹ He once wrote to his publisher,

1. Chew, S.C., op. cit., pp. 30, 31; note Byron's observance of unities in his three historical plays in contrast to the disregard of unities in the romantic dramas of the period.

It appears to me that there is room for a different style of the drama; neither a servile following of the old drama, which is a grossly erroneous one, nor yet too French, like those who succeeded the old writers. It appears to me, that good English, and a severer approach to the rules, might combine something not dishonorable to our literature.²

Nor did he seek in dramatic composition a means to gratify an egotistic urge, for Byron was as sensitive as he was egotistic, and he could not tolerate the thought of an abusive audience. He repeatedly disavowed any intention of writing for the stage, which he considered "not a very exalted object of ambition."³ In 1821, upon hearing that one of his own plays was about to be produced, he wrote in protest,

I have never written but for the solitary reader, and require no experiments for applause beyond his silent approbation. Since such an attempt to drag me forth as a gladiator in the theatrical arena is a violation of all the courtesies of literature, I trust that the impartial part of the press will step between me and this pollution [i.e. the production of Marino Faliero] I say pollution, because every violation of a right is such, and I claim my right as an author to prevent what I have written from being turned into a stageplay. I have too much respect for the public to permit this of my own free will. Had I sought their favour, it would have been by a pantomime.

I have said that I write only for the reader. Beyond this I cannot consent to any publication, or to the abuse of any publication of mine to the purposes of histrionism. The applauses of an audience would give me no pleasure; their disapprobation might, however, give me pain. The wager is therefore not equal. You may, perhaps, say, 'How can this be? if their disapprobation gives pain, their praise might afford pleasure?' By no means: the kick of an ass or the sting of a wasp may be painful to those who find nothing agreeable in the braying of one or the buzzing of the other.⁴

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2. Byron, Lord, Letter 412, to John Murray, Feb. 16, 1821, in Moore, T., The Works of Lord Byron: with His Letters and Journals and Life, V, p. 127.
 3. Coleridge, E.H., ed., Poetical Works of Lord Byron, IV, p. 323.
 4. Byron, Letter to Mr. Perry, Jan. 22, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 137.

From this and from numerous other assertions of a similar nature,⁵ it is evident that it was certainly not to gratify his ego that Byron turned to the dramatic form.

If Byron had written his plays in the period preceding his final departure from England instead of after, his motive in writing them might well have been explained by his interest in the theatre. When still a mere boy, he was very much interested in actors and acting. He even took part in some amateur play productions. Concerning this early interest, he once wrote to Moore,

When I was a youth, I was reckoned a good actor. Besides Harrow speeches (in which I shone), I enacted Penruddock in the Wheel of Fortune, and Tristram Fickle in Allingham's farce of the Weathercock, for three nights. . . , in some private theatricals at Southwell, in 1806, with great applause. The occasional prologue for our volunteer plays was also of my composition.⁶

He even attempted to write a drama, Ulric and Ilvina, when he was only thirteen years of age.⁷ It was based on the same theme, apparently, as the later Werner, but, as he afterwards remarked, he "had sense enough to burn it," and not until fourteen years later did he essay a similar composition again.⁸

"I am like a tiger," he wrote to Murray in 1821: "if I miss my first spring, I go growling back to my jungle again; but

5. Coleridge, E.H., op. cit., IV, preface to Marino Faliero, p. 327; p. 327; Byron, Lord, Letter 872, to Murray, Feb. 16, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., p. 127.

6. Moore, op. cit., I, p. 116.

7. Coleridge, op. cit., V, p. 338.

8. Bates, op. cit., p. 45.

if I do hit, it is crushing."⁹ When he plunged into dramatic composition definitely, it was crushing; he composed eight dramas in a little more than five years.

For a time, Byron manifested a strong liking for theatrical performances.¹⁰ In 1813 he had a box at Covent Garden for an entire season, and was a most enthusiastic playgoer. The following year the committee of Drury Lane engaged Edmund Kean to play the part of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice. His opening appearance roused the audience to almost uncontrollable enthusiasm. Successive appearances in Richard III, Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and Lear served to demonstrate his complete mastery of tragic emotion. No one except Garrick had been so successful in so many impersonations.¹¹ Byron was very much impressed with him. On February 19, 1814, he wrote in his journal, "Just returned from seeing Kean in Richard. By Jove, he is a soul! Life -- nature -- truth without exaggeration or diminution. . . Richard is a man; and Kean is Richard."¹² The next day he was introduced to Kean, and that night he wrote, "I wish I had a talent for the drama; I would write a tragedy now. But no, -- it is gone. . . While you are under the influence of passions you only feel, but cannot describe them. . ."¹³

9. Byron, Lord, Letter to Murray, Nov. 3, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 231.

10. Byron, Lord, "On a Distant View of Harrow" - stanzas 5 & 6.

11. "Edmund Kean", Encyclopedia Britannica (11th ed.), XV, p. 705.

12. Byron, Lord, Journal, 1813-1814, II, Feb. 19, 1814, in Moore, op. cit., III, p. 5.

13. Ibid., Feb. 20, 1814, p. 387.

In May, he wrote to Moore, "I am acquainted with no immaterial sensuality so delightful as good acting; and, as it is fitting there should be good plays, now and then, besides Shakespeare's, I wish you or Campbell would write one: -- the rest of 'us youth' have not heart enough."¹⁴

A year later, in a letter to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, he said,

If I may be permitted, I would suggest that there never was such an opening for tragedy. In Kean, there is an actor worthy of expressing the thoughts of the characters which you have every power of embodying; and I cannot but regret that the part of Ordonio [taken by Rae in the original performance of Remorse given at Drury Lane, January 23, 1813] was disposed of before his appearance at Drury Lane. We have had nothing to be mentioned in the same breath with Remorse for very many years."¹⁵

This early interest in drama was influenced further by the fact that for a while between 1815 and 1816 Byron was a member of the Sub-committee of Management at Drury Lane. He apparently enjoyed the responsibilities of this position, and was active in the work. These activities inspired him to begin the first draft of Werner, his one effort in the popular mode, in 1815, and, had not domestic difficulties interrupted,¹⁶ he doubtless would have finished it then; but seven years elapsed before he resumed and finished the work.

14. Byron, Lord, 448, to Thomas Moore, May 8, 1814, in Moore, op. cit. III, p. 81.

15. Letter 532, to S.T. Coleridge, March 31, 1815, in Moore, op. cit. III, p. 191.

16. Coleridge, E.H., op. cit., V., Advertisement to Werner, p. 338.

When unhappy circumstances in his domestic affairs made life in England seem intolerable, Byron exiled himself and launched on an extended journey on the continent,¹⁷ where he grew to abhor all things English, and his thorough detestation of the stage dates from the time of this final departure from his native land. "I will never have anything to do willingly with the theatres," he declared.¹⁸

Byron possessed a great creative spirit and a nature very subject to influences, two qualifications necessary to every successful dramatic writer. Miss Mayne in her Byron declares that no mind was ever so receptive as Byron's for the "spirit of place," as externally expressed, and that nothing in Byron is more remarkable than his extreme sensibility to influence.¹⁹ The rank, youth, and misfortune of Byron, his exile from England, the mystery which he loved to throw around his history and emotions, the apparent depth of his sufferings and attachments, and his very misanthropy and scepticism formed a combination of personal circumstances which aided him further toward expressing himself dramatically.

Byron's pilgrimage abroad provided new material for his impressionable mind to ponder, and the period of exile was a most prolific one. Historic materials, beautiful scenery, political agitation, all combined to provide material for his pen.

Byron wrote because "his mind was full" of his own loves

17. "Self exiled Harold wanders forth again - -" (Child Harold, canto 3, l. 136). op. cit.

18. Chew, op. cit. p. 37.

19. Mayne, E.C., Byron, II, pp. 110-111.

and griefs, because he wanted to register a protest against the tyrannies of law and faith and custom which he came upon in his travels, and because there was abundant material at hand about which to write. He chose the dramatic form for eight of his compositions during this period, not because it was being employed by other English poets, not because he sought the approval and praise of an audience, and not because of any great respect for the contemporary stage. For him the drama was only a literary form -- a vehicle by which he meant to convey his thoughts, and through it he gave the world three metaphysical plays of no small merit, three historical plays which have excellencies as well as weaknesses, and two other pieces difficult to classify and of very little value.

CHAPTER III

A Study of Byron's Individual Plays

(with a brief estimate of his dramatic skill)

A.

Manfred

Manfred was Byron's first completed attempt at drama.

More than any other of his dramatic pieces, it shows the strong influence of the surroundings in which it was written. He composed the first two acts during the summer of 1816 while he was in Switzerland, and the following spring in Italy he appended the third.¹ Consequently, the poem -- especially the first two-thirds of it -- reflects the influence of the awful beauty of the Alpine scenery upon Byron's sensitive mind.

Byron acknowledged his indebtedness to the inspiration of the Alps, but he refused to admit to the direct influence of any previous work of literature. When the poem appeared, critics found similarities in it to Goethe's Faust, to the Prometheus of Aeschylus, and to The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus by Marlowe.³

But Byron wrote to Murray,

I never read, and do not know that I ever saw, the Faustus of Marlow, and had, and have, no Dramatic works by me in English; . . .but I heard Mr. Lewis translate verbally some scenes of Goethe's Faust. . .last summer; -- which

1. Coleridge, E.H., op. cit., IV, p.79. Introduction to Manfred.

2. Ibid., p. 78.

3. Ibid., p. 80, 81.

is all that I know of the history of that magical personage; -- and as to the germs of Manfred, they may be found in the Journal which I sent to Mrs. Leigh. . . when I went over first the Dent de Jamont, and then the Wengeren or Wengeberg Alp and Scheideck and made the giro of the Jungfrau, Switzerland. I have the whole scene of Manfred before me, as if it was but yesterday, and could point it out, spot by spot, torrent and all. . . Of the Prometheus of Aeschylus I was passionately fond as a boy (it was one of the Greek plays we read thrice a year at Harrow). . . if not exactly in my plan, [it] has always been so much in my head, that I can easily conceive its influence over all or anything I have written; -- but I deny Marlow and his progeny, and beg that you will do the same.⁴

Later critics have attempted to trace the influence on Manfred of Chateaubriand's Rene, Walpole's Mysterious Mother, Coleridge's Remorse, and Lewis's Monk;⁵ but although we know from other sources that Byron was familiar with these plays, it is doubtful whether any of them was a direct source for Manfred. The chief causative influences of the poem obviously are the Alps and his own experiences and temperament in reaction to the theme of the poem.

Manfred is one of the best examples in Byron's poetry of the dualistic conception of the universe.⁶ It tells of the triumph of mind over matter, of soul over body, and it reflects the doctrine of the authoritative principle of conscience. The hero, in the majestic solitude of the central Alps, is substantially alone through the poem, and the whole design of the work seems to be to delineate his character and to interpret his emotions. The other characters in the poem are negligible.

4. Byron, Lord, Letter 675, to John Murray, Oct. 12, 1817, in Moore, op. cit., IV, p. 173.

5. Chew, S.C., op. cit. Chapter 4.

6. Ibid., p. 161.

In describing the work to his publisher, Byron called it 'a kind of Poem in dialogue. . . of a very wild, metaphysical, and inexplicable kind.'

Almost all the persons -- but two or three --, are Spirits of the earth and air, or the waters; the scene is in the Alps; the hero a kind of magician, who is tormented by a species of remorse, the cause of which is left half unexplained. He wanders about invoking these Spirits, which appear to him, and are of no use; he at last goes to the very abode of the Evil Principle, in propria persona to evoke a ghost, which appears, and gives him an ambiguous and disagreeable answer; and in the third act he is found by his attendants dying in a tower where he has studied his art. . .⁷

The events upon which the poem is based have taken place before the opening scene, and are only hinted at in the poem proper. The hero, solitary, partly by inclination, partly by the consciousness of superiority to his fellow-men, and partly by the weight of remorse for an inexpiable crime, is a man of mystery. He is usually regarded by critics as the culmination of the Byronic hero type. In the closing scenes of the play, the priest, musing over Manfred's dead body, says,

This should have been a noble creature: he
Had all the energy which should have made
A goodly frame of glorious elements,
Had they been wisely mingled; as it is,
It is an awful chaos -- light and darkness --
And mind and dust -- and passions and pure thoughts
Mixed, and contending without end or order,
All dormant and destructive.

7. Byron, Lord, Letter 261, to Mr. Murray, Feb. 15, 1817, in Moore's The Works of Lord Byron with his Letters and Journals and His Life, III, p. 345-346.

This is the popular conception of Byron as a man. Perhaps it is the type of person he chose to have people believe him to be. At least, he strove to emphasize the elements of gloom and terror in his works. Although Manfred is primarily an attempt to give objective expression to intensely subjective emotion, it bears some relationship with the school of terror which so strongly influenced the Romanticists of the seventeenth century.

The Alpine setting of Manfred gave Byron an opportunity to display his mastery in describing Nature in its most picturesque stages. It provided an excuse for numerous lyric effusions, some parts of which are among Byron's best.

Manfred is more typical of the romantic mood than any other of Byron's dramatic pieces -- perhaps more than any other of his works. Among the aspects of romanticism which it presents are the belief that knowledge brings only unhappiness and trouble, that there is a melancholy beauty in solitude, and that tradition is a thing to be ^{re}possessed. With this is combined the appearance of immortal spirits. Manfred holds very little communion with the few mortals who appear in the play. His discourse, aside from soliloquy, is chiefly with the beings which he evokes by means of his incantations.

For this reason the poem is largely a monologue and only nominally dramatic. It opens with a soliloquy which presents the essentials of the situation -- grief, sin, death, and the search for knowledge and forgetfulness in the unfathomable depths of life's mysteries. The first scene ends in a long poetical incantation,

by the invisible spirits, -- a device that is powerful poetically but not dramatically. Indeed, the poetic speeches of the spirits throughout the first two acts lend an other-worldly charm to Manfred. Except for the 'dusk and awful figure' which appears but does not speak, the spirits are absent from the third act.

The climax in the poem is well marked. After exerting his power over the world of destinies and spirits, Manfred reaches the extent of his magical skill when he penetrates the region of the Evil Principle and converses with the dead Astarte. This is the turning point, for his decline begins immediately and his death, which Astarte has announced in the climactic sentence, "Tomorrow ends thine earthly ills,"⁸ soon follows. The third act is little more than an anti-climax.

Byron realized the weakness of the last part of the play. In a letter to Murray, April 9, 1817, he said, "As for Manfred, the two first acts are the best; the third so so; but I was blown with the first and second heats. You may call it 'a Poem' for it is no Drama, . . . or -- Pantomime, if you will ----"⁹

Earlier he had said, "I have no great opinion of this piece of fantasy; but I have at least rendered it quite impossible for the stage, for which my intercourse with Drury Lane has given me the greatest contempt."¹⁰ And again, "I have really and truly no

8. Act II, Sec. 4, 151.

9. Byron, Lord, Letter to Mr. Murray, April 9, 1817, in Moore, op. cit., IV, p. 4.

10. Byron, Lord, Letter 261, to Mr. Murray, Feb. 15, 1817, in Moore, III, p. 346.

notion of whether it is good or bad; and as this was not the case with the principal of my former publications, I am, therefore, inclined to rank it very humbly. . . With regard to the question of copy-right. I do not know whether you would think three hundred guineas an over-estimate; if you do, you may diminish it: I do not think it is worth more."¹¹

Notwithstanding these deprecating remarks, Byron doubtless had a fairly good opinion of Manfred. He casually wrote to Moore, "I wrote a sort of mad Drama, for the sake of introducing the Alpine scenery in description: and this I sent lately to Murray. Almost all the dram. pers. are spirits, ghosts, or magicians, and the scene is in the Alps and the other world, so you may suppose what a Bedlam tragedy it must be: make him show it to you."

The appearance of Manfred aroused much comment in England. Among those who criticized it most severely were Jeffrey, who wrote a review of it in the Edinburgh Review, August, 1817, and John Wilson, who commented on it in the Edinburgh Monthly Magazine in June. There was much discussion of the belief that the work was based upon the fatal issue of an incestuous passion, and it was on the basis of the belief that the allusion was autobiographical that Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe several years later made her charges against Lord Byron's morals.

11. Byron, Lord, Letter 265, to Mr. Murray, March 9, 1817, in Moore, op. cit., III, p. 354.

Jeffrey, after criticizing the incest motive of the poem, points out other faults. He says that Manfred "fatigues and overawes us by the uniformity of its terror and solemnity. . .The lyrical songs of the Spirits are too long; and not all excellent. There is something of pedantry in them now and then; and even Manfred deals in classical allusions a little too much. If we were to consider it as a proper drama, or even as a finished poem, we should be obliged to add, that it is far too indistinct and unsatisfactory."¹² He admits, however, that Manfred is a work of genius and originality.

Later critics, on the whole, have been more kind in their estimates of the dramatic poem than were Byron's contemporaries. Paul Elmer More declares, "Manfred in its own sphere is unrivaled; it is superb."¹³ And S.C. Chew asserts that the reader who finds Manfred only full of revolt has not reached its full meaning. "For the final message of the poem," he says, "is very positive. . .In Manfred, despite the sense of the clod of clay which clogs the soul, the final victory is felt to remain with the forces of good."¹⁴

Goethe's verdict that "the English may think of Byron as they please, but this is certain that they show no poet who is compared with him" was and is the keynote of continental European criticism. Of Manfred there is one Bohemian translation, two Danish,

12. Jeffrey, F., Essays from the Edinburgh Review, p. 146.

13. More, Paul Elmer, ed., Complete Poetical Works of Lord Byron, p. 478.

14. Chew, op. cit., pp. 83-84.

two Dutch, two French, nine German, three Hungarian, three Italian,
two Polish, one Romans, one Rumanian, four Russian, and three
Spanish.¹⁵

15. Coleridge, *op. cit.*, IV, p. 905.

B.

Marino Faliero

Byron had no sooner finished Manfred until he began work on another dramatic composition. This work, however, was not to be merely a dramatic poem; it was to have the form of a play proper. On February 25, 1817, Byron wrote to Murray asking him to procure for him material on the matter of the conspiracy of the Doge Valiere, and to send it to him at once, as he was very much interested in the subject and meant to write a tragedy upon it. It seemed to him to have great dramatic possibilities.¹ Other matters soon occupied his time, however, and he did not finish the play until July 17, 1820, three years later.

Italy has been a source of inspiration for more than one English poet, but Byron, perhaps more than any other, became Italianized in habits and ideas, and entered completely into the associations, the history, and the political intrigues of the Italian people.² The temperament of the Italian mind fascinated him. Furthermore, Italy was a country rich in history, and he was passionately interested in historical research.³ It is small wonder, therefore, that when Byron heard the story of the Doge Faliero (sometimes called Valiere) the rationalistic common-sense side of his nature led him to attempt a

1. Byron, Lord, Letter to Murray, Feb. 25, 1817, in Moore, op. cit., III, p. 348.

2. In school, history was Byron's favorite study. Mayne, E.C., Byron, I, 43.

3. McMahan, Anna Benneson, With Byron in Italy, Introduction, p. XV.

drama on the subject. Contemporary dramatists had frequently asserted the independence of the individual; Byron now undertook to present the yearnings of an entire people for liberty.⁴

Through this attempt, Byron purposed to win distinction for himself by showing that it was possible to write an historically accurate drama, and, further, to write it simply and to follow the classical unities -- a practice which his English contemporaries disregarded. In England the romantic mood prevailed, whereas in Italy a pseudo-classical tendency, exemplified in the works of Alfieri, was beginning to assert itself.⁵ When Byron wrote Manfred he was still under the spell of English romanticism, and the super-natural and lyrical elements in the poem gave it a romantic flavor. For Marino Faliero, on the other hand, Byron drew his material from the beaten track of history and refused to admit the intervention of the spirit world in his plan.

The theme of the play is the civic corruption of Venice; the overthrow of the aristocratic oppressors of the people. "The whole people groan with the strong conception of their wrongs," and in the Doge, who has been offended by an act of the council, they find a champion for their cause.

Steno, a nobleman, has insulted the young wife of Doge Faliero. It is the duty of "the Forty" to decide upon his punishment,

4. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 27.

5. Ibid., p. 170.

but, because he is a nobleman, they sentence him only to a month's imprisonment; whereas the Doge feels that his action is worthy of a death sentence. When Faliero learns of their decision, his fury towards Steno turns to a violent indignation with "the Forty" and he willingly allies himself with the conspirators against the aristocrats. "Some sacrifices asked a single victim," he says; "great expiations had a hecatomb."

The plot and the eventual failure of the conspiracy comprise the subject-matter of the play. The exposition throughout is natural and brisk, and the plot is simple and easy to follow. The essential weakness of the plan of the drama lies in the fact that the climax comes early in the fourth act and the remainder of the play, especially the fifth act, is a dull, actionless, and undramatic anti-climax.

Except for two or three passages that are quite poetic in their beauty, the style of the drama is rigidly matter-of-fact. When he wrote the play, Byron seems to have realized that neither his style nor his subject would appeal to the romance-loving public.

He insisted that he did not intend the play to be presented. "It is too regular, and too simple, and of too remote an interest," he declared, and "I will not be exposed to the insolences of an audience without a remonstrance."⁶ Although he pleaded that it should not be put on the stage, the play was presented at the Drury Lane Theatre, April 25, four days after its publication.⁷ The drama, sheet by sheet from

6. Mayne, E.C., Byron, II, pp. 181, 182.

7. Coleridge, Poetical Works of Lord Byron, IV, p. 324.

the compositor's hands, had been brought from the printing office to the theatre, and the whole play studied before it was published.

Byron was almost beside himself with rage when he learned of its production. He had urged that, rather than that it be staged, it should be suppressed entirely. He could not endure the censure of an audience, and the play, as he had foreseen, was not popular.

Criticisms of the play vary. The general contention is, however, that the motive is inadequate for the resulting action, and is therefore dramatically improbable.⁸ Byron, however, declared that the play was subjective, and that he was sure that he "would have done precisely what the Doge did on those provocations."⁹

Taking into consideration the temperament of the Doge, his action does not seem inconsistent with his character. The wife of Faliero says of him,

Time has but little power
On his resentments or his griefs. Unlike
To other spirits of his order, who,
In the first burst of passion, pour away
Their wrath or sorrow, all things wear in him
An aspect of Eternity: his thoughts,
His feelings, passions, good or evil, all
Have nothing of old age; and his bold brow
Bears but the scars of mind, the thoughts of years,
Not their decrepitude. . .¹⁰

And later, the Doge says,

8. Cambridge History of English Literature, XII, p. 53.

9. Mayne, E.C., op. cit., II, p. 185, 186.

10. Act II, Sc. 1, 13-22.

It was ever thus
 With me; the hour of agitation came
 In the first glimmerings of a purpose, when
 Passion had too much room to sway; but in
 The hour of action I have stood as calm
 As were the dead who lay around me; this
 They knew who made me what I am, and trusted
 To the subduing power which I preserved
 Over my mood, when its first burst was spent.
 But they were not aware that there are things
 Which make revenge a virtue by reflection,
 And not an impulse of mere anger; though
 The laws sleep, Justice wakes, and injured souls
 Oft do a public right with private wrong,¹¹
 And justify their deeds unto themselves.¹¹

In his criticism of the play in the Edinburgh Review, Jeffrey asserted that it was "deficient in the attractive passions, in probability, and in depth and variety of interest."¹² Elze, in his Lord Byron, declares that Marino Faliero is nothing but a succession of long-winded declamatory dialogues between two or three persons, without a trace of the development of character, and almost without the conflict of tragedy.¹³ Miss Mayne remarks that though it has energy and pathos, the play is flat and monotonous.¹⁴

On the other hand, Goethe, to whom Byron dedicated the play, was enthusiastic in his praise of Marino Faliero. "One quite forgets that Lord Byron or even an Englishman wrote it," he declared. "We live entirely in Venice, and entirely in the time in which the actions took place. . . The personages have none of the subjective

11. Act IV, Sc. 2, 93-107.

12. Jeffrey, Essays from the Edinburgh Review, p. 121.

13. Elze, Karl, Lord Byron, p. 407.

14. Mayne, E.C., Byron, II, p. 187.

feelings, thoughts, or opinions of the poet."¹⁵ Drinkwater asserts that the play is notable for its rapid and stimulating action and for its vivid and convincing personages. He adds further that if the play were properly presented it would handsomely survive the test of the stage.¹⁶

¹⁵. Ibid., II, pp. 185, 186.

¹⁶. Drinkwater, John, A Pilgrim of Eternity, pp. 313, 314.

C.

Sardanapalus

Byron finished Marino Faliero late in July and sent it for publication to Murray in October. In January he wrote to his publisher, "If Marino Faliero don't fall in the perusal, I shall, perhaps, try again (but not for the stage). . ."¹ The idea for a new drama was already in his mind, for a few days later he wrote in his journal, "Sketched the outline and Dram. Pers. of an intended tragedy of Sardanapalus, which I have for some time meditated. Took the names from Diodorus Siculus, (I know the history of Sardanapalus, and have known it since I was twelve years old)."²

During the following months, while he was writing the drama, Byron was in the midst of public events of the keenest interest³ -- events which no doubt influenced him to treat the anti-tyranny theme in Sardanapalus because the plots of the Carbonari for the liberation of Italy from the Austrian yoke were not unlike the conspiracies of the Medians against the Assyrian throne in the seventh century.

Another circumstance which influenced the composition and tenor of Byron's Sardanapalus was his liaison with the Countess Teresa Guiccioli. He had met her early in 1819, and mutual interest,

1. Byron, Lord, Letter to Murray, Jan. 4, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 115.

2. Journal, Jan. 13, 1821, in Moore, op. cit. V, p. 74.

3. Byron, Lord, Journal, Jan. - June, 1821. in Moore, op. cit., V.

if not actual love, had resulted. From that time until Byron's departure for the East four years later, the two were together a great deal, and there are numerous instances in the works he produced during this period which evidence the influence of the countess upon him.

In the new drama, she inspired the creation of the chief woman character -- Myrrha, the favorite mistress of King Sardanapalus. Jeffrey considers this character the chief charm of the entire piece.⁴

Byron used himself as a model for the character of the Assyrian king. Sardanapalus is the idealization of Byron's conception of himself -- the type of person he liked to have people think he was. Pleasure-loving, epicurean, over-sensuous, the king scorns war, glory, and kingship. He is a skeptic and a believer in Fate. The following speech of Sardanapalus,

I am the very slave of circumstance
And impulse -- borne away with every breath!
Misplaced upon the throne -- misplaced in life.
I know not what I could have been, but feel
I am not what I should be -- let it end.⁵

is but the poetic version of Byron's own statement, "I have always believed that all things depend upon Fortune, and nothing upon ourselves."⁶

The autobiographical element enters also into the attitude of Sardanapalus towards his wife.⁷ Byron was probably think-

4. Jeffrey, Essays from the Edinburgh Review, p. 108.

5. Act IV, Sc. 1, 13.

6. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 107.

7. Act I, Sc. 2, 602-606; IV, Sc. 1, 26-27.

ing of his own wife's influence over their daughter Ada when, in the conversation between Zarina and Sardanapalus concerning their sons, he had the woman say to her husband,

They ne'er
Shall know from me of aught but what may honour
Their father's memory.

In Sardanapalus there is more character development than in any of Byron's other plays. The king, voluptuous and effeminate at the opening of the drama, shows, as the play progresses, a true courage and a depth of character that inspires our sincere admiration. Although there is less development in the characters of Myrrha, Zarina, and Salamenes, they are all life-like, and are portrayed firmly and boldly. The characterizations of the wife and the mistress of Sardanapalus are well contrasted, and Salamenes provides an excellent foil to the character of the king.

The play opens with a soliloquy in which Salamenes foreshadows the coming conflict and sets forth the character of the king. In the scenes that follow, the conflict rapidly precipitates, and it is evident that, unless Sardanapalus rallies his forces against the Medians, who are conspiring against him, the Assyrian throne will be lost. A climax is reached in the opening of the third act, however, and he realizes the treachery of those who are plotting against him when one of his own men, wounded and bloody, appears and warns him of the approaching struggle.

The actual conflict that follows results in an apparent victory for Sardanapalus and his men, but when the battle is renewed

later, the Median forces are victorious and Salamenes, the pillar of the king's party, is killed. The true heroism of Sardanapalus now comes to the surface, and he calmly prepares to die when he sees that his kingdom is lost. The play dramatically closes when he and Myrrha ascend the funeral pile of Salamenes. They have determined to perish with the downfall of the state. Before he dies, the king nobly bids adieu to Assyria:

I loved thee well, my own, my father's land,
And better as my country than my kingdom.
I sated thee with peace and joys; and this
Is my reward! and now I owe thee nothing,
Not even a grave.

In form, Sardanapalus has much in common with Marino Faliero. Each was written in blank verse and each has five acts. There are twice as many scenes in the Venetian play, however, as in Sardanapalus, and the latter is much more poetic than the former. It abounds in finely executed passages of description.⁸ The speeches like those of Marino Faliero are, on the whole, long and a bit too declamatory, and soliloquy is a frequently used device for imparting facts.

Byron's general purpose in writing the play was much the same as his purpose in his first "regular" drama; he sought to show that it was possible to present historical material accurately -- this time, however, the story was only nominally historical,⁹ -- and

8. Byron, Lord, Letter 439, to Mr. Murray, July 22, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 203.

9. Chew, op. cit., p. 111.

to preserve the classical unities. He did not intend the drama for presentation on the stage. In the preface he declared, "In publishing the following. . . I have only to repeat, that. . . it was not composed with the most remote view of the stage. On the attempt made by the managers in a former instance, the public opinion has been already expressed. With regard to my own private feelings, as it seems that they are to stand for nothing, I shall say nothing."¹⁰

Sardanapalus was never presented during Byron's life, but in 1834 it was played at the Drury Lane Theatre, and appeared a number of times thereafter with not a little success. The strong characterization element in the play gave it more dramatic interest than its predecessor had, and the criticisms of the piece were, on the whole, more kind than the criticisms of the Venetian drama.

Miss Mayne declares, however, that she considers the defects of flatness and monotony in Marino Faliero intensified a hundredfold in Sardanapalus.¹¹ Oliver Elton, on the other hand, in his Survey of English Literature, praises the play for its poetry and pageantry,¹² and Jeffrey considered it a work of great power and beauty.¹³

10. Coleridge, Preface to Sardanapalus, The Two Foscari, and Cain, p. 9.
 11. Mayne, E.C., op. cit., II, p. 187.
 12. Elton, Oliver, Survey of English Literature, 1770-1830, p. 166.
 13. Jeffrey, op. cit., p. 105.

D.

The Two Foscari

I'd rather be a unit
Of an united and Imperial "Ten",
Than shine a lonely, though a gilded cipher.
(I, i, 194-6).

Byron's passion for historical drama continued for all little more than a year. Two weeks after he had finished Sardanapalus he was ready to start his third "regular" play, and in less than a month it was finished.¹

The circumstances which had caused Byron to write Marino Faliero and Sardanapalus -- the political intrigues with which he was actively concerned, and his interest in the "ancient chroniclers" -- were the obvious influences which inspired him to essay historical drama again. Furthermore, the comparatively cordial reception by critics of Sardanapalus inspired him to continue composing in the same vein. He still regarded the unities as his great object of research,² but his object as he confided to Murray concerning the three historical plays, was "to dramatise, like the Greeks. . . , striking passages of history, as they did of history and mythology."³

Faru's Histoire de la Republique de Venise and Sismondi's Histoire des Republiques. . . du Moyen Age were the immediate sources from which Byron drew the material for The Two Foscari,⁴ and he

1. The Two Foscari was begun on June 12, and finished on July 9, 1821. (See Introduction to The Two Foscari in Coleridge's edition of The Poetical Works of Lord Byron, V, p. 115.)

2. Byron, Lord, Letter to Mr. Murray, July 22, 1821, in Moore, op. cit. V, 203.

3. Letter to Mr. Murray, July 14, 1821, in Ibid., V, 202.

4. Coleridge, E.H., op. cit., V., p. 115.

emphasized in the play the great theme of civic corruption and intellectual freedom. On the part of the aristocrats who were the real governors of the commonwealth, there is the gross abuse of power; on the part of the Doge Foscari who is the nominal governor there is the dogged allegiance to duty and Venice; and on the part of the Doge's son, whose passionate love for Venice causes his untimely death, there is a sense of intellectual liberty in spite of physical torture and imprisonment.

The interest of the story turns upon the fact that the younger Foscari has returned from banishment to Venice, in defiance of the law and inevitable punishment, because of an overpowering love for his native state. The Council of Ten, attempting to force him to confess his guilt, sentences him to torture on the rack -- a punishment which he suffers bravely, for he prefers a dungeon in Venice to freedom in exile, and if he confesses to the crime of which he has been accused he will be banished again. The Doge stolidly refuses to let parental love interfere with his duty to the state, and the young Foscari can hope for no aid from him. Besides, the elder Foscari believes that his intervention would only cause trouble for them both, is opposed to "The Ten." One member of the Council is especially anxious to rid the country of the Foscari; the Doge, he thinks, has been instrumental in causing the death of his father and uncle, and he desires vengeance.

At last, when the younger Foscari continues to maintain silence, the Council decides to exile him once more, and to permit his

wife to accompany him; but just as they are about to embark, the exiled man, weakened by suffering, dies. The countil then, at the instigation of the one who seeks revenge for his father's and uncle's deaths, asks the Doge to resign his position; but the Doge, whose voluntary resignation has twice before been rejected, has made a vow to die in full exercise of the functions which his country requires of him, and he now refuses to abdicate his throne. He dies shortly, a disappointed and broken-hearted old man.

The story of the Foscari has dramatic possibilities which, carefully manipulated by a skilled dramatist, might have made a great play. Byron, however, in his desire to adhere rigidly to historical accuracy and to the "unities," produced a decidedly inferior work.

In the first place, The Two Foscari does not follow a dramatic plan. It has no rising action; from the beginning of the play, the fortunes of the Doge and his son sink towards extinction, and there is no climax. The story, though a pathetic one, is not dramatically tragic because there is no resistance.⁵

Although there is some disagreement as to the merits and faults of the first two of Byron's historical dramas, the general criticism of The Two Foscari is that it is dramatically impossible, and that it is one of the weakest if not the very poorest of Byron's works. "There is some pathos in The Two Foscari," Oliver Eltan says, "but it is frittered away, and the verse moves along a low, level,

5. Chew, op. cit., p. 52.

tiresome tableland."⁶ Various critics have pointed out the fact that the motives in the play are forced and inadequate and that the characters are strained and unnatural.⁷

Byron protested against the censure of the drama, however. "That young Foscari should have a sickly affection for his city, was no invention of mine," he said. "I painted them [i.e., the characters in the Venetian dramas] as I found them, not as the critics would have them. I took the stories as they were handed down; and if human nature is not the same in one country as it is in another, am I to blame? But no painting, however highly coloured, can give an idea of the intensity of a Venetian's affection for his native city."⁸ Later he wrote to Murray, "To be sure, they [i.e. his new dramas] are as opposite to the English drama as one thing can be to another; but I have a notion that, if understood, they will in time find favour (though not on the stage) with the reader. The simplicity of plot is intentional, and the avoidance of rant is also, as also the compression of the Speeches in the more severe situations. What I seek to show in *The Two Foscari* is the suppressed passion, rather than the rant of the present day."⁹

6. Elton, Oliver, op. cit., 1770-1830, p. 166.

7. Elze, Karl, Lord Byron, p. 407.

Jeffrey, op. cit., p. 104, 105; Cambridge History, XII, p. 54.

8. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 100.

9. Letter to Mr. Murray, Sept. 20, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 248.

E.

Cain

Knowledge is good,
And life is good; and how can both be evil?
(I, i, 37-38)

One of the chief reasons for the failure in England of Byron's three historical dramas was the fact that his English audience was unfamiliar with the subject-matter of the plays, and Byron, intent upon observing the unities, condensed his dramas to such a degree that, instead of acquainting his readers with his characters by cultivating interest in them through a gradual development of personality and motive, he literally plunged them into the stories, not merely In medias res, but into the very conclusion of them.¹ In other words, he expected his readers to interest themselves in the fortunes of people with whom they had had no previous acquaintance.

From the standpoint of familiarity, Byron was more fortunate in choosing the subject for his next drama; in other respects perhaps, his choice was less fortunate.

Byron began Cain just a week after he had completed his second Venetian play, and he finished it on September 9, seven weeks later.² He sent it to Murray immediately, asking him to publish it with Sardanapalus and The Two Foscari which he had already sent. The three plays appeared together December 19, 1821.

1. Chew, S.C., op. cit. pp. 41-43.

2. Coleridge, E.H., op. cit., V, p. 199.

For some time Byron had considered the tragic possibilities of the biblical narrative of Cain. Shortly after he began work on Sardanapalus he wrote in his journal that he was pondering the subjects for four tragedies, among them "Cain, a metaphysical subject, something in the style of Manfred, but in five acts, perhaps with the chorus."³ The play in its completed form, however, contained only three acts and had no chorus.

Although he hated religious dogma, Byron had a great respect for and a deep interest in the Bible,⁴ and his familiarity with it is evidenced by the frequency with which he treated biblical themes in his poetry. Goethe once observed that Byron should have lived "to execute his vocation. . . to dramatize the Old Testament."⁵ Indeed, his fascination for Scriptural material was secondary only to his passion for history.

In writing Cain, however, he did not observe the accuracy which he had attempted to follow in his historical plays. The fourth chapter of Genesis, on which the drama is based, furnished only the general situation for the drama; the theme and the treatment of it is Byronic. He deliberately questions the justice and love of the 'self-proclaimed Principle of Good'⁶ --

Because
He is all-powerful, must all-good, too, follow?⁷

3. Byron, Lord, Jan. 28, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 89.

4. Byron, Lord, Letter 462, to Mr. Murray, Oct. 9, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 265.

5. Coleridge, E.H. op. cit. V, p. 199.

6. Chew, op. cit., p. 131.

And, if he does not actually exalt the character of Cain, he at least makes him appeal to our sympathy. Cain, as Byron has conceived him, is not the cruel murderer about whom we have been taught since childhood. He is kind as a father, a loving husband, -- the victim of doubt and circumstance. Abel, on the other hand, almost repels us as being too much of a 'goody-goody,' and Adam is little more than a preacher of morals.

Byron summarized the story of the drama in a letter to Moore, just after he had sent the play to his publisher:

Cain is in the Manfred, metaphysical style, and full of some Titanic declamations; -- Lucifer being one of the dram. pers. who takes Cain a voyage among the stars, and afterwards to 'Hades,' where he shows him the phantoms of a former world, and its inhabitants. I have gone upon the notion of Cuvier, that the world has been destroyed three or four times, and was inhabited by mammoths, behemoths, and what not; but not by man till the Mosaic period. . . I have, therefore, supposed Cain to be shown, in the rational Preadamites, being endowed with a higher intelligence than man, but totally unlike him in form, and with much greater strength of mind and person. .

The consequence is, that Cain comes back and kills Abel in a fit of dissatisfaction, partly with the politics of Paradise, which had driven them all out of it, and partly because (as it is written in Genesis) Abel's sacrifice was the more acceptable to the Deity.⁸

The play is a mixture of pageantry and argumentation.

Its interest depends chiefly upon the poetic treatment of the subject, although not a little depends upon the character of Cain, which shows a constant development, and upon Lucifer, whose wit and

8. Byron, Lord, Letter 453, to Mr. Moore, Sept. 19, 1821, in Moore, op. cit. V, p. 245.

subtlety are skillfully devised. The action of the play, though very simple, is kept alive by means of the quick, staccato-like conversation of the characters -- a device which Byron might have used with profit in his historical plays.

There is scarcely any climax in the action of the play, for Cain, from the beginning, is a skeptic and a rebel against circumstances. The actual turning-point in the thought of the drama, however, comes at the close of the second act when under the influence of Lucifer, Cain begins to show definite signs of revolting openly.⁹

It is not easy today to realize the violent indignation and alarm caused by the appearance of Cain. When it was published, the clergy denounced the author,¹⁰ and when the work was pirated, the Lord Chancellor refused to protect Murray in his rights of property, on the grounds of it being immoral and irreligious.¹¹ Jeffrey, reviewing the drama in the Edinburgh Review, wrote, "Of Cain, a Mystery, we are constrained to say, that, though it abounds in beautiful passages, and shows more power than any of the author's dramatical compositions, we regret very much that it should ever have been published."¹² And, although Moore was enthusiastic about it from the very first,¹³ he told Byron, "Grand as it is, I regret, for many reasons, you ever wrote it."¹⁴

Byron was incensed with the attitude of the public and the critics towards what they regarded as his atheistic principles.

9. Act II, Sc. 2, 420 ff.

10. Byron, Lord, Letter 478, To Mr. Moore, Feb. 19, 1822, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 307.

11. Byron, Lord, Letter 480, to Moore, Feb. 28, 1822 in Moore, op. cit. V, p. 309.

12. Jeffrey, Essays from the Edinburgh Review, p. 122.

13. Letter to Byron, Sept. 30, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 318.

14. Letter to Byron, Feb. 9, 1822, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 318.

With respect to "Religion," [he wrote to Moore] can I never convince you that I have no such opinions as the characters in the drama, which seems to have frightened everybody. Yet they are nothing to the expression in Goethe's Faust. . . , and not a whit more bold than those of Milton's Satan. . . I am no enemy of religion, but the contrary. . . I incline, myself, very much to the Catholic doctrines; but if I am to write a drama, I must make my characters speak as I conceive them likely to argue.¹⁵

And to Murray he protested,

If Cain be 'blasphemous,' Paradise Lost is blasphemous; Cain is nothing more than a drama, not a piece of argument; if Lucifer and Cain speak as the first murderer and the first rebel may be supposed to speak, surely all the rest of the personages talk also according to their characters — and the stronger passions have ever been permitted to the drama.

I have even avoided introducing the Deity, as in Scripture (though Milton does, and not very wisely either); but have adopted his Angel as sent to Cain instead, on purpose to avoid shocking any feelings on the subject by falling short of what all uninspired men must fall short in, viz., giving an adequate notion of the effect of the presence of Jehovah.¹⁶

Criticisms of the poetry of Cain have varied. Shelley enthusiastically declared, "It contains finer poetry than has appeared in England since the publication of Paradise Regained."¹⁷ Goethe said, "Its beauty is such as we shall not see a second time in the world."¹⁸ And Sir Walter Scott, to whom the play was dedicated, wrote to Murray that in the "very grand and tremendous drama of Cain,"

15. Letter to Moore, March 4, 1822, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 319.

16. Byron, Lord, Letter to John Murray, Feb. 8, 1822, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 305.

17. Byron, Lord, Letter to Gisbourne, April 10, 1822, as quoted by Chew, S.D. Byron in England, p. 76.

18. Chew, S.C., Ibid., p. 76.

Byron had "certainly matched Milton on his own ground."¹⁹ Lord Broughton, on the other hand, said, "I think it has scarce one specimen of real poetry or even musical numbers in it. . . Some will call it blasphemous, and I think the whole world will finally agree in thinking it unworthy."²⁰

Oliver Elton, in his Survey of English Literature, says that Byron's *Cain* "too often resembles an eighteenth century heretic who rediscovers some elementary objections to the cruder forms of orthodoxy, and states them in the almost dissonant verse."²¹ He goes on to say, however, that Byron "sometimes rises to the height of the subject, and that not only when he catches for a moment the Miltonic ring, but also when his verse is musical and his own, and when he attains the naked strength and pure pathos that are so often blurred and overlaid in his writing," and that, in spite of all its faults, *Cain* is one of the great super-terrestrial dramas in the language.²²

Byron was very much put out by the general reception of his plays. In a moment of discouragement he wrote to Shelley,

The only literary news that I have heard of the plays (contrary to your friendly augury) is that the Edinburgh R. has attacked them all three i. e. Sardanapalus, The Two Foscari, and Cain as well as it could. . . Murray writes discouragingly, and says 'that nothing published this year has made the least impression'. . . You see what it is to throw pearls before swine. As long as I write the

19. Mayne, E.C., op. cit., II, p. 219.

20. Broughton, Lord, Recollections of a Long Life, II, p. 172.

21. Elton, Oliver, op. cit., 1770-1830, II, p. 164.

22. Elton, Oliver, II, p. 165.

exaggerated nonsense which has corrupted the public taste, they applauded to the very echo, and, now that I have composed, within these three or four years, some things which should 'not willingly be let die, & the whole herd snort and grumble and return to wallow in their mire. However, it is fit I should pay the penalty of spoiling them, as no man has contributed more than me in my earlier compositions to produce that exaggerated and false taste. It is a fit retribution that any really classical, production should be received as these plays have been treated.²³

Contemporary condemnation of Cain belongs to the past.

The twentieth century mind does not concern itself with the blasphemy of the piece, but rather with the poetic and dramatic value of it. Certainly, Cain is not essentially dramatic either in conception or execution. It would be quite impossible to present upon the stage. It is, indeed, a sustained lyric in dramatic form, not unlike Manfred. Although the poetry of it is of uneven merit, the play on the whole is "a singular exercise of 'poetic energy'"²⁴ that is truly splendid.

23. Letter 1005, to Percy Bysshe Shelley, May 20, 1822, in Moore, op. cit., VI, p. 67.

24. Coleridge, op. cit. V, p. 204.

F.

Heaven and Earth

And where is the impiety of loving
Celestial natures? I, i, 10.

The fascination of the metaphysical theme which had inspired the composition of Cain lingered in Byron's mind and soon sought expression in another lyrical drama, a kind of sequel to Cain. Byron began Heaven and Earth October 9, 1821, and in two weeks had completed the first part of the Mystery. Although he made a sketch for the second part, he never did finish the poem in fact, he seems to have had no intention of completing it at that time, for in the letter in which he sent it to Murray he implied that he wished to have it published with Sardanapalus, The Two Foscari, and Cain just as it stood:

Enclosed is a lyrical poem. . . which, perhaps may arrive in time for the volume. . . I wish the first part published before the second, because, if it don't succeed, it is better to stop there than to go on in a fruitless experiment.¹

Heaven and Earth was not included in the volume, however. Indeed, it was not published until over a year later, when it appeared in The Liberal, January 1, 1823. Murray had printed it earlier than this, but, after having the censure of critics when he published Cain, was reluctant to submit the new Mystery to public criticism. He had become, as Byron put it, "the most timid of God's booksellers,"

1. Byron, Lord, Letter 467, to Mr. Murray, Nov. 9, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 282.

taking "a dislike to that three-syllabled word Mystery," and saying that it was only "another Cain."²

On the title page of his second *Mystery*, Byron observed that Heaven and Earth was "Founded on the following passage in Genesis, Chap. VI, 1, 2. 'And it came to pass. . .that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose.'" He made no acknowledgement of any other source, and, although there have been numerous attempts to establish an influence relationship with the Chester, Townsley, Coventry, and New York plays of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with contemporary poems on the theme, and with Goethe's Faust, there is little or no actual evidence of Byron's indebtedness to these sources.³ It is possible, however, that he drew some material from the apocryphal Book of Enoch, of which a new translation had recently appeared⁴ and with which Byron was evidently familiar.⁵

The theme of Heaven and Earth is the Byronic one of rebellion against eternal law. Aholibamah is Cain-like in her assertion against the Creator:

But thee and me he never can destroy;
Change us he may, but not o'erwhelm; we are
Of as eternal essence, and must war
With him if he will war with us. . .⁶

2. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 135.

3. *Ibid.*, Chapter VII.

4. Coleridge, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

5. The apocryphal book contains notable parallel to Cain. (Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 137.)

6. Act I, Sc. 1, 119-122/

And with this sense of the injustice of the Almighty power is coupled a strain of fatalism. Japhet, foreseeing the destruction of the sinful race of man in the flood, laments,

All beauteous world!
So young, so marked out for destruction. . .⁷

The story of Heaven and Earth centers around the passionate love of Anah and Aholibamah, daughters of Cain, for the angels Azazial and Samiasa. Anah, of a gentle and mild temperament, is uncertain whether it is right for them thus to love the sons of God; but Aholibamah resolutely asks,

And where is the impiety of loving
Celestial natures?⁸

Japhet, who loves Anah devotedly, tries to save her and her sister from punishment for their folly by reasoning with them.

We are sent
Upon the earth to toil and die; and they
Are made to minister on high unto
The Highest.⁹

But when he warns them against impending destruction, Aholibamah asks, "Who shall shake these solid mountains, this firm earth?" and at his answer, "He whose one word produced them," she comes back

7. Act I, Sc. 3, 47-48.

8. Act I, Sc. 1, 10.

9. Act I, Sc. 3, 341 ff.

with the challenge, "Who heard that word?"¹⁰

Noah in confident self-righteousness urges Japhet to leave the sinners to destruction and to repair to the safety of the Ark, but Japhet is reluctant to leave the one he loves; and expresses a longing that the redemptive power of the Almighty were greater so that she might be included with the 'remnant of Seth' which God has chosen to save. But the daring Aholibamah proudly scorns his wishes for their redemption --

And dost thou think that we,
With Cain's, the eldest born of Adam's, blood
Warm in our veins, -- strong Cain! who was begotten
Seth, the last offspring of old Adam's dotage?
No, not to save all Earth, were Earth in peril!
Our race hath always dwelt apart from thine
From the beginning, and shall do so ever.¹¹

The archangel Raphael enters and rebukes Azazel and Samiasa for consorting with earth-born creatures, and warns them against the wiles of woman whose kiss, he says, is more subtle than the serpent's voice and whose power is great enough to "draw a second host from heaven, to break Heaven's law."¹² But the sinful angels are willing to be shorn of celestial power, and announce their intention of bearing Anah and Aholibamah with them "to some untroubled star" where they can forget Heaven and Earth. Anah mourns the loss

10. Act I, Sc. 3, 449 ff.

11. Act I, Sc 3, 388-395.

12. Act I, Sc. 3, 590-593.

of her birthland, but her sister remains daringly defiant to the moment of their departure from the earth.

The flood rises. A band of mortals, flying for refuge, implore mercy, but it is too late. The waves rise and engulf them, but the Ark, with its occupants, is serene and safe. Thus, at the very climax, the fragment ends; there is no falling action whatever.

Byron was wise to end the piece where he did. What, indeed, would have been the reception of a second part of Heaven and Earth by a people who had accused Byron of blasphemy when Cain appeared? Had he concluded the Mystery by allowing the sinning "sons of God" and "daughters of Cain" to escape punishment entirely he would have only aroused the wrath and censure of his readers and critics. On the other hand, to have appended the story of the destruction of the lovers would have made a tiresome anti-climax which would have spoiled the dramatic effect of the first part.

In writing the Mystery, Byron had no thought of the stage. The dramatic form was merely a device. Describing the play to Murray, he said, "As it is longer, and more lyrical and Greek, than I intended at first, I have not divided it into acts, but called what I have sent Part First, as there is a suspension of the action which may either close there without impropriety, or be continued in a way that I have in view."¹³

The fragment, then, is chiefly lyrical, somewhat in the

13. Byron, Lord, Letter 467, to Mr. Murray, Nov. 9, 1821. Moore, op. cit., V, p. 282.

style of Manfred. The invocations of Anah and Aholibamah, the 'Greek choruses,' and the angels of Heaven and Earth are reminiscent of the incantations of Manfred, the choruses of the spirits, and the supernatural beings of the earlier lyrical drama. The Mystery, however, is much more earthly than Manfred, and it has fewer purely poetic descriptions.¹⁴

Heaven and Earth did not excite as much adverse comment as Cain had -- a circumstance due no doubt to the fact that it was a fragment, was less widely read, and was published after the horror inspired by the first Mystery had somewhat subsided. Miss Mayne, in her Byron, contends that the piece is not to be taken seriously.¹⁵ Goethe, however, preferred it to all the other serious poems of Byron, and declared it to be "more intelligible" and "clearer than Cain, which was too profound in its thoughts, too bitter, although fascinating, bold, and sublime."¹⁶ Hazlitt, whose general opinion of Byron's dramatic works was poor, considered Heaven and Earth his best, and observed that the stage on which the characters in the Mystery pass "seems to fill Byron's imagination," and that "the Deluge, which he has so finely described, may be said to have drowned his own idle humours."

14. Act I, Sc. 3, 1 ff.; Act I, Sc. 3, 725 ff.

15. Mayne, E.C., op. cit., II, p. 187.

16. Elze, K., op. cit., pp. 417, 418.

G.

Werner

Suspicion is a heavy armour, and
 With its weight impedes more than protects.
 I, I, 664-665.

Byron's very first attempt in dramatic composition was Ulric and Ilvina, a tragedy which he began when he was but thirteen years old and which, as he said afterwards, he "had sense enough to burn."¹ Fourteen years later, at the time of his connection with the sub-committee of the Drury Lane theatre, he turned to the subject again, and wrote the first act of Werner. Domestic difficulties interrupted, however, and the drama was not finished.² But Byron did not forget the subject. Six years later, when he was at work on Heaven and Earth, he wrote to Murray asking him to send the Werner fragment he had begun in 1815. He started a second draft of the play December 18, 1821, and finished it January 20, 1822.³

He made no pretensions to originality in the drama. In the preface, he frankly acknowledged his indebtedness to a story published many years before in "Lee's Canterbury Tales" -- the German's Tale, Kruitznor, from which he "adopted the characters, plan, and even the language of many parts of the story."⁴ The theme, that of inherited sin -- "A son predestined to evil by the weakness and sensuality of his father, a father punished for his want of

1. Coleridge, E.H. op. cit., V. 338.

2. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 35.

3. Coleridge, op. cit., V, p. 325.

4. Ibid., V, p. 337.

rectitude by the passionate criminality of his son,"⁵ -- appealed to Byron's sense of retribution, and Werner is like all of Byron's other dramas in that its essential elements are crime and justice.

In substance and style the play is very different from his previous dramatic compositions. In the first place, it shows a decided reaction against the straitness of his historical plays. Byron had, indeed, begun to turn to the English romantic tradition when he wrote Cain and Heaven and Earth, but he had not utterly disregarded the unities as he did in writing Werner. Furthermore, unlike the other dramas, this play has no Byronic hero. Werner, about whom the story revolves, is not even consistently portrayed, and the play shows no development whatever: the psychological as well as the physical action moves along at the same dead level.

Manfred, the Venetian plays, Sardanapalus, and the two Mysteries, all show some progression or retrogression; the only element in Werner which shows progress is time. There is no single scene which may be defined as the climax.

The style of Werner is heavy and intricate, unrelieved by poetic grace and beauty. Coleridge declared that although "Byron scamped his task. . . here and there throughout the play, in scattered lines and passages, he outdoes himself," -- that "the inspiration is fitful, but supreme."⁶ But this is certainly an exaggeration. S.C. Chew is more nearly correct in his assertion

5. Coleridge, op. cit., V, p. 328.

6. Coleridge, op. cit., V., 328.

that the greatest flaw of the piece "is its almost utter lack not alone of the higher reaches of poetry but of any poetry at all."⁷ And Miss Mayne says that she found nothing whatever in the play to repay perusal.⁸

Strangely enough, however, Byron attained in Werner a theatrical success that was astounding. In spite of its uneven and inconsistent characterization, it proved to be the most actable of his dramatic works, although he had asserted in the preface to the play that "the whole thing is neither intended, nor in any shape adapted, for the stage,"⁹ it was one of the most popular productions of the day.¹⁰

7. Chew, The Dramas of Lord Byron, p. 144.

8. Mayne, op. cit., II, p. 187.

9. Coleridge, op. cit., V, p. 338.

10. Bates, A Study of Shelley's Drama The Cenci, p. 45;
Coleridge, op. cit., p. 325.

H.

The Deformed Transformed

. . . You would be loved -- . . . -- loved for yourself --
III, 61-62.

Neither Byron's letters nor his journals contain any reference to the unfinished drama The Deformed Transformed, and the only date on the original manuscript is "Pisa, 1822."¹ Consequently, the date of its composition is only a matter of conjecture. It is certain, however, that the piece was written, or at least begun, before July 8, 1822, the date of the death of Shelley, who, according to Medwin, had seen and criticised the manuscript.²

Byron, very sensitive in all matters, had a horror of being considered a plagiarist, and in the advertisement to the drama he carefully acknowledged his indebtedness to two sources: The Three Brothers, a novel by a certain Joshua Pickersgill, published in 1803, and now almost forgotten; and "the Faust of the great Goethe."³ Another influence which figures largely in The Deformed Transformed was Byron's own lameness, which, according to Mrs. Shelley, in some way affected everything he did and almost everything he wrote.⁴ He was indebted also to various chronicles of the sack of Rome in 1527 about which Part II of the play is concerned.

As in his other plays, so in The Deformed Transformed, Byron used the dramatic form as a literary device rather than with

1. Coleridge, op. cit., V, p. 469.

2. Medwin, Memoir of Percy Bysshe Shelley, p. 151.

3. Coleridge, op. cit. p. 474.

4. Mrs. Shelley's note in her copy of The Deformed Transformed, as quoted by Coleridge, op. cit., p. 474.

stage production in view. By this device he purposed to present the solution of a metaphysical problem⁵ in combination with one of the more outstanding events in the history of the world. With this function as a basis for the work, Byron sought to treat the interaction of personality and individuality in a character whose desire for love and power and beauty is insatiable. The interest of the story itself, therefore, lies in the psychological development rather than in the physical action. The action necessarily introduced is unnatural and awkward.

In the opening scene of the drama, Arnold, a deformed hunchback, hungry for love and beauty sells his soul to the powers of evil in exchange for the gift of physical perfection, and thereby assumes the shape of the young Achilles. The next three scenes, constituting the second part of the drama, represent the Sack of Rome in 1527; and the third act which is only a fragment, consists of a chorus of praise to spring, sung by the peasants, and of a scene between Arnold and the spirit who gave him a new shape--a scene which indicates Arnold's discontent and his unsatisfied longing for love.

The play shows no definite scheme of characterization of motivation. The scene between the hunchback and his cruel mother, colored by Byron's painful memories of the mockery he endured in his boyhood because of his own lameness,⁶ presents a modd and a situation

5. Compare the metaphysical element in the Deformed Transformed with Manfred, Cain, and Heaven and Earth.

6. When Byron was a child, his mother in a fit of passion once called him a "lame brat." Perhaps the whole drama The Deformed Transformed is based on this recollection. At least it is reflected in the lines --

Bertha: Out hunchback!

Arnold: I was born so, mother.

which is, to a certain degree, resumed and developed farther in the third part; but the intervening three scenes of part two present an entirely different mood and situation which in no way furthers the character development of even contributes to the progress of the story. After the first scene, which really has excellent possibilities, the inspiration is lost and the interest drags.

The style of the fragment is uneven, but much of the poetry is comparable in rhythm and grace to the poetry of Manfred, Cain, and Heaven and Earth. Like these metaphysical predecessors, the play abounds in lyrical choruses, and it has several notable passages of description, though none as fine as those in Manfred.

The fragment was published in February, 1824, and the reviews of it which appeared in the contemporary magazines were, on the whole, unfavorable.⁷ Shelley had not been impressed with it, and had called it "a bad imitation of Faust."⁸ Goethe loyally declared, however, that the play as a whole was "no imitation," but "new and original, close, genuine, and spirited."⁹ Oliver Elton, outstanding among more recent critics of literature, says that the play "is full of poetry and of a daemonic energy," and describes the song of the soldiers as "homely, strong, and rockly."¹⁰

From the narrative standpoint, The Deformed Transformed is a disappointment, but from the poetical standpoint many of its passages may be ranked with the poetry of Manfred and the two Mysteries.

7. Coleridge, op. cit. p. 472.

8. Medwin, op. cit., p. 151.

9. Goethe, Conversations, 1874, p. 174, as quoted in Coleridge, op. cit., V, p. 471.

10. Elton, Oliver, op. cit., 1770-1830, II, p. 139.

I.

A Summary Estimate of Byron's

Dramatic Skill

Byron's greatest weakness in dramatic composition lay in his inability to construct a plot properly. He lacked the technical knowledge which, more than anything else, is essential in the equipment of successful dramatists and novelists. It matters not how dramatic a situation may be in its original conception, it will inevitably lose much of it if it is poorly told.

The subjects which Byron chose for his plays had dramatic possibilities which, if properly manipulated, might have resulted in the production of dramas of truly great excellence. But Byron's style as a play wright was cramped, and, because he allowed himself to be restricted by rules that he might well have disregarded, it was impossible for him to accomplish anything outstanding in a dramatic way.

In the first place, he did not lay proper emphasis on tragical incident; there is not enough conflict in his plays. His characters act far too little on each other, and fail, therefore, to excite fear, hatred, or pity. All of his heroes and heroines are victims of circumstances, but they submit to it without resistance. Consequently, there is little or no opportunity for character development. Sardanapalus, because it shows actual development in character more than do any of the other plays, is the best of the entire group, dramatically speaking. The other dramas are wanting in variety of effect.

The historical plays are especially defective in that they presuppose the familiarity of the audience with situations which were unknown to the English mind. Instead of attempting to acquaint his readers with the characters with which he chose to deal, Byron began his dramas in medias res in order to preserve the classical unities. This device, if skilfully handled, makes for conciseness and strength in the development of a plot, but Byron failed to master it and, as a result, his dramas are wanting in plan and organization.

Byron was hampered further by his devotion to introspection and philosophical observation which found expression in long soliloquies and dialogues. These protracted speeches give the plays a monotonous effect. Furthermore, the tendency to philosophize lends an air of subjectivity to the dramas, and the drama, more than any other type of literary composition should be objective.

Then too, Byron found the metre of the drama difficult; he could not make it flow harmoniously throughout. His genius expressed itself best in lyric writing, and blank verse, as he himself confessed, was of all metres the most difficult for him to handle.¹ Occasionally, however, the verse of his dramas is as fine as any that he ever wrote, and no doubt if he had taken time to revise what he wrote he would have been even more successful.

Considering his lack of knowledge of technical theatrical requirements, it is nothing short of amazing that Byron attained the

1. Medwin, Thomas, Conversations with Lord Byron, p. 365, as quoted by Elze, Karl, Lord Byron, p. 405.

success in the dramatic field that he did, and especially that Werner, the poorest of his completed dramas from the standpoint of plan, construction, and characterization, should be more successful on the stage than any of his other plays.

CHAPTER IV

Shelley's Motive and Preparation For Dramatic
Writing

In Italy, Shelley, like Byron, found a source of inspiration for his poetic genius. He had grown out of sympathy with England, and he was glad enough in 1818 to withdraw from his active life there to a more contemplative one in "the land of ideal scenery" where his talent might have an opportunity to develop more freely. His literary activity up to that time had consisted chiefly of writing propagandist pamphlets on religion, society, and politics, and, although he had composed numerous lyrics and some longer poems of note, he was almost as obscure in the poetic world as Byron was popular. It is to the Italian period of his life, therefore, that his most noteworthy productions belong, among them two of his dramas, Prometheus Unbound and The Cenci. Professor Dowden in his Life of Shelley makes a striking statement concerning the poet's first year in Italy. "The year 1819 was his Annus mirabilis," he says, "and in one year to have created two such poems as the "Prometheus" and the "Cenci" is an achievement without parallel in English poetry since Shakespeare lived and wrote."¹

Byron was contemplating the subject for his second drama when Shelley decided to try his hand at dramatic composition,

1. Dowden, Edward, The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley, II, p. 278.

and in the four years that intervened between that time and the time of his death in 1822 he attempted that literary form seven times. Consequently, the period of his dramatic efforts is almost coincident with that of Byron's, but although the poets were fairly closely associated during these years, their mutual influence as reflected in their dramas seems to have been very slight indeed.

C.W. Campbell has drawn an interesting comparison between the two poets in his book Shelley and the Unromantics:

They were nearly of an age; both had parents who could teach them little good, and much evil; both had physical beauty; both were aristocrats, yet of revolutionary and democratic sympathies; both were inspired to poetry by their love of Greece, yet both, at a certain stage in their careers, put politics above poetry, and aimed at a life of activity; both were deeply sensitive to the beauty of nature; both were exiled to the same beautiful country -- exiled, both, because they could not endure to live in an atmosphere of public disapproval and hatred; both hated and regarded as moral outcasts for ostensibly the same reasons -- because both had left their legal wives for a mistress, and both wrote skeptically about religion and innovatingly about morals; both seemed to have very strong paternal feelings, and had to endure a separation from their children; both suffered much in life, and both died young.²

This, as far as it goes, is an accurate comparison. Yet, notwithstanding these striking similarities, Shelley was very different from Byron in his personality, in his training, and in his interests.

Shelley's nature was extraordinarily simple, whereas Byron's was complex. His opinions were as constant as Byron's were

2. Campbell, Olwen Ward, Shelley and the Unromantics, p. 23.

inconstant. He was always in earnest; Byron liked to trifle. Byron believed in the existence of matter and evil; Shelley resolved the whole of creation into spirit, and added to this immaterial system the abstract principle of love and beauty. He lived with his eyes fixed on the ethereal, the unreal; Byron was intent on the world about him. Shelley loved all humanity, and bore its censure humbly, though he did not allow the world's opinions to change his own ideas. Byron scorned all, but was goaded to defiance by the criticism of the public. Shelley's goodness, especially his unselfishness, impressed Byron almost more than did the literary accomplishments of his fellow poet who was destined to become greater than himself; Shelley regarded Byron's poetic genius with humble awe, but regretted that he was such "a slave to the vilest and most vulgar prejudices, and as mad as the winds." "Space wondered less at the swift and fair creations of God when he grew weary of vacancy," he wrote to a friend about Byron in 1822, "than I at the late works of this spirit of an angel in the mortal paradise of a decaying body."³

The poets' literary differences were as great, too, as were the differences in their personalities. Together they opposed old standards in a struggle for the freedom of the individual, but, as Elze points out in his biography of Byron, the ways through which they strove to attain this end and consummation were at variance. Byron could sympathize neither with Shelley's metaphysics nor his

3. Letter to Mr. Gisborne, Jan. 12, 1822, as quoted by Dowden, E., The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley, II, p. 447.

predilection for classic mythology. His interest lay in social and political problems primarily, and especially in history. Furthermore, when he treated historical material he was very anxious that it be authentic and accurate. Shelley, on the other hand, had only a very slight interest in history. "Facts are not what we want to know in poetry," he said. "They are the mere divisions, the arbitrary points on which we hang, and to which we refer those delicate and evanescent hues of mind which language delights and instructs us in precise proportion as it expresses."⁴

So, too, in their relation to the theatre and the drama of the day, Byron and Shelley differed. If Byron's greatest weakness as a playwright was in his lack of technical knowledge, he at least possessed an actual acquaintance with the stage that surpassed that of most, if not all, of the contemporary romanticists. Shelley knew as little about it as any of them. According to Mrs. Shelley, Hogg, Medwin, and Peacock, he had a strong aversion for theatrical productions until he was well past twenty. His equipment to write was, therefore, considerably less than Byron's, -- even less, perhaps, than that of the other closet dramatists of England.

This lack of mastery of theatrical tools did not prevent Shelley's attempting dramatic composition, however. But in the case of all of his completed dramas, with the exception of

4. Dowden, op. cit., I, p. 335.

the Cenci, he wrote with no view to stage production. The dramatic field was for him, as for Byron, merely a literary device through which he could express his philosophical ideas better than through any other medium, and he was influenced to use the form in nearly every case by some Greek model.

In his lyrical plays, Shelley made no pretense of making characters and scenes conform to the requirements of the stage. In The Cenci, on the other hand, he made an effort to observe these requirements, and in his desire to have this play presented, he showed a truer dramatic sense than did Byron, who repeatedly affected indifference to the presentation of his plays. In fact, in both The Cenci and the semi-lyrical Prometheus Shelley rose to a dramatic height to which Byron, notwithstanding his superior knowledge of the stage, never attained.

A careful study of Shelley's dramas will reveal the excellencies and the weakness of the poet as a dramatist.

Chapter V

A Study of Shelley's Individual Plays

(with a brief estimate of his dramatic skill.)

A.

Prometheus Unbound

Shelley left England for the third and last time March 12, 1818. In Italy where he spent the rest of his life, he produced the great works which have given him an enduring fame, among them his dramas Prometheus Unbound and The Cenci. His other and less important dramatic attempts belong to this period also.

In April he began contemplating the subjects for three dramas: the madness of Tasso, the story of Job, and the Prometheus myth. When he communicated his plans to Peacock he said, "But, you will say, I have no dramatic talent. Very true, in a certain sense; but I have taken the resolution to see what kind of tragedy a person without dramatic talent could write."¹

He essayed the Tasso theme first; but the subject proved unfitted for him. Only a small fragment of the play was written: a charming little love song of three stanzas in length, and less than thirty lines, very sketchily written, of the drama proper.

In September, however, he turned to the Prometheus subject, which had fascinated him for some time. He began the play

1. Woodberry, George Edward, ed., The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, p. 161.

in the summer house of his garden at Este and had finished the first act by October 8. In November the Shelleys decided to go south for the winter, and the drama was laid aside and not resumed until at ROME in the following spring. There he added the second and third acts, finishing them before April 6. The fourth act, an afterthought, was written at Florence towards the end of the year, and the finished work was published, with other poems, in the summer of 1820.

Prometheus Unbound was the result of a double stimulus: Shelley's great delight in the beauties of Italy, and his enthusiastic Greek studies. Concerning the influence of his surroundings on the poet, Mrs. Shelley wrote,

The first aspect of Italy enchanted Shelley; it seemed a garden of delight placed beneath a clearer and brighter heaven than any he had lived under before. He wrote long descriptive letters during the first year of his residence in Italy, which, as compositions, are the most beautiful in the world, and show how truly he appreciated and studied the wonders of nature and art in that divine land. . . The charm of the Roman climate helped to clothe his thoughts in greater beauty than they had ever worn before. . .²

And Shelley himself declared,

The bright blue sky of Rome, and the effect of the vigorous awakening spring in that divinest climate, and the new life with which it drenches the spirits even to intoxication, were the inspiration of this drama.³

2. Mrs. Shelley's note to the play as quoted by Woodberry, G.E., op. cit., pp. 161, 162.

3. Shelley's preface to Prometheus Unbound as quoted by Woodberry, op. cit., p. 163.

Perhaps his surroundings inspired the composition of the drama, but the suggestion for the subject matter of the work came directly from the Prometheus of Aeschylus. In his short life, Shelley had read more Greek than many an aged scholar. "No English poet," Professor Dowden remarks, "ever drank with more eager delight from the old-world sources of beauty and wisdom than Shelley."⁴ During the winter of 1815-16 his studies were almost exclusively Greek. The season, Hogg said, was a "mere Atticism."⁵ During the spring and summer of 1818 he eagerly read the Greek tragedians, and thus disciplined his mind for dramatic writing -- for to Shelley it seemed that the dramatic art was never understood or practiced according to the true philosophy of it as it had been at Athens.⁶ He was especially delighted over "the sublime majesty of Aeschylus,"⁷ and he wrote to Peacock saying, "You know not how delicate the imagination becomes by dieting with antiquity day after day."⁸

The subject of Prometheus has always appealed strongly to idealists. Goethe thought of him as human creator, shaping man in his own image, and scorning God; Beethoven used the theme in his music; Byron saw in him a symbol of divineness.⁹

4. Dowden, op. cit., I, p. 330.

5. Ibid., I, p. 536.

6. Shelley, Percy Bysshe, "The Defense of Poetry," in Shelley, Mrs. (ed.). Essays, Letters from Abroad, I.

7. Dowden, op. cit., II, p. 239.

8. Ibid., II, p. 256.

9. Cambridge History of English Literature, XII, p. 71.

Aeschylus had depicted Zeus, the all-powerful, as good, and had had Prometheus finally surrender to him. The Greek Titan merely defies, listens, and is stricken down. To Shelley this was intolerable. He saw no good in power as such, but felt rather that Jupiter, reigning over a world of woe, was bad. He therefore suppressed the Aeschylean reverence for Jove and enlarged the admirable qualities of Prometheus so as to harmonize with his own idea of perfection. "The moral of the fable," he declared, "would be annihilated if we could conceive him unsaying his high language, and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary."¹⁰ For him Prometheus was the symbol of man, creating, enduring, suffering, but not succumbing.

The desire to reform was always strong in Shelley, and he purposed in treating the Prometheus theme to express his sense of the evil conditions of the universe; to represent a sudden miraculous change in that condition, and finally to sing the glory of the universe thus transformed. "Prometheus," he said in the preface to the poem, "is. . .the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature impelled by the purest and truest motives to the best and noblest ends."¹¹

Life, to Shelley, seemed to consist entirely of a conflict between good, and evil, always unreasonably opposed to the good. The principle, therefore, that underlies the myth as

10. Cambridge History of English Literature, XII, p. 71.

11. Woodberry, op. cit., p. 163.

he treated it is that evil is accidental to man's nature and not inherent in it: that man has only to will that there shall be no evil, and there will be none, and that the world may be regenerated by the power of love. The cardinal point of his system is that man could be so perfected as to be able to expel evil from his own nature, and from the great part of the creation. Thus, as H.S. Salt points out in his discussion of the poem, Shelley put a new and deeper meaning into the framework of the old Greek legend.¹²

The first union of Prometheus and Asia, which existed before Jove's dominion began, is the Saturnian Age of primitive innocence and natural simplicity. This is followed by the tyranny of Jove who has usurped his father's throne, and who has separated man from nature. Aeschylus allowed his poem to conclude at this point, but Shelley, by bringing about the release of Prometheus and his final union with Asia, inaugurates the perfect age of mature wisdom and natural love, and the spirit of triumph emanates from the ultimate omnipotence of good.

Shelley's Prometheus acts as the spirit of love which, to him, was the central principle of things and the key to the ideal future of humanity, and consequently becomes the divine Christ-like sufferer, who wishes "no living thing to suffer pain," and refuses to curse even his persecutor. From this first renunciation

12. Salt, H.S., A Shelley Primer, p. 64.

of his vows of vengeance to his last appeal to Love, he steadily gains in power and virtue. The first act, however, contains practically all of the dramatic development of the play.

When the play opens, Prometheus appears bound to a precipice in a ravine of icy rocks in the Indian Caucasus. He has been chained there and is suffering punishment for uttering a terrible curse against Jupiter, and his only source of consolation is the knowledge that eventually Jupiter will fall. Yet he regresses the curse:

I speak in grief,
Not exultation, for I hate no more,
As then ere misery made me wise. The curse
Once breathed on thee I would recall.¹³

Then he asks the Mountains, the Springs, the Air, and the Whirlwinds to repeat the curse to him in order that he might, in remembering, revoke it; but they only shudder to think of it, and will not answer him. At last, at the suggestion of Earth, he summons the Phantasm of Jupiter and persuades him to repeat the curse to him. As he is repenting the terribleness of it, Jupiter's messenger Mercury comes and begs him to reveal the secret upon which depends the downfall of Jupiter which has been foretold -- a secret which Prometheus alone knows. The Titan refuses to tell what he knows, and Mercury, in

13. Act I, Sc. 1, 56-59.

accordance with the commands of Jupiter, calls upon the Furies to punish the offender. Prometheus calmly endures the torture because, he says,

I would fain
Be what it is my destiny to be,
The savior and the strength of suffering man,
Or sink into the original gulf of things.
There is no agony, and no solace left;
Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more.¹⁴

The dramatic situation is thus far presented and developed in the first act. The first three scenes of Act II are almost irrelevant to the development of the plot. Prometheus does not appear in them at all. Asia and Panthea, the daughters of Ocean, are instructed through dreams to seek the dwelling of Demogorgon whom they find, in the fourth scene, to be

A might darkness
Filling the seat of power, and rays of gloom,
Dart around, as light from the meridian sun,
Ungazed upon and shapeless; neither limb,
Nor form, nor outline; yet we feel it is
A living Spirit.¹⁵

Asia asks him who made the living world and all that it contains, and he answers, "God: Almighty God." But when she asks who made terror, madness, crime, remorse, he dares not utter the name, and says only, "He reigns." Then he launches into an account of the Ages through which the world has passed. He points out the

14. Act I, Sc. 1, 816-121.

15. Act II, Sc. 4, 2-7.

relationship between Saturn, Jupiter, and Prometheus, characterizing each. He informs the Oceanides that all things, excepting Love which is eternal, are subject to Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance, and Change. Asia, happy because Prometheus "shall arise henceforth the sun of his rejoicing world," asks when the destined hour of his deliverance will arrive. Demogorgon thereupon summons the immortal Hours, and the Shadow of a Destiny invites the sisters to accompany him.

The next scene finds them with the Spirit of the Hour on the top of a snowy mountain. Asia is suddenly transfigured, much to Panthea's wonder:

How thou art changed! I dare not look on thee;
I feel but see thee not. I scarce endure
The radiance of thy beauty.¹⁶

Then a voice in the air sings a song to Asia, and she replies with a delightful little lyric, beginning,

My soul is an enchanted boat,
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float,
Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing. ¹⁷

In the first scene of the third act, in Heaven, Jupiter appears for the first and only time. He reveals in a few lines the cruelty and selfishness of his despotism. He exults in his supremacy

16. Act II, Sc. 5, 15-17.

17. Act II, Sc. 5, 72-74.

over the world, and feels secure that he will soon be able to subdue the soul of man which alone, "like unextinguished fire, yet burns towards heaven with fierce reproach." By Thetis, the "bright image of eternity," he has begotten

a strange wonder,
That fatal child, the terror of the earth,
Who waits but till the destined hour arrive,
Bearing from Demogorgon's vacant throne
The dreadful might of even living limbs,
Which clothed that awful spirit unbeheld,
To redescend, and trample out the spark.¹⁸

He hails the approach of the Car of the Hour, expecting this "fatal child," to whom he looks for aid, to descend. To his surprise, he is confronted by the awful shape of Demogorgon who announces that he must accompany him into the great anyss. No resistance, he says, will avail.

I am thy child, as thou wert Saturn's child;
Mightier than thee; and we must dwell together
Henceforth in darkness. Lift thy lightnings not.
Thy tyranny of heaven none may retain,
Or reassume, or hold, succeeding thee. . .¹⁹

Jupiter implores mercy in vain. The elements close about him, and he sinks "dizzily down, ever, forever down."

In the next scene Ocean and Apollo rejoice over the downfall of Jupiter; and scene three, which follows, witnesses the unbinding of Prometheus by Hercules. This last portion of the third

18. Act III, Sc. 1, 18-24.

19. Act III, Sc. 1, 54-59.

act more than any other part of the drama, with the possible exception of the first act, contains Shelley's philosophy of life, and his idea of an ideal existence. He sums up the entire thought in the closing lines of the act:

The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself; just, gentle, wise; but man
Passionless -- no, yet free from guilt or pain,
Which were, for his will made or suffered them;
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,
From chance, and death, and mutability,
The clogs of that which else might oversoar
The loftiest star of unascended heaven,
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.²⁰

Shelley had originally intended this to conclude his drama, but some months later he had an "afterthought" and appended the fourth act, which, like the second, further neither the dramatic action nor the plot. Nevertheless, it makes a majestic conclusion for the whole. Professor Dowden calls it "a sublime after-thought," and Clutton-Brock says it is like "the triumphant finale of a symphony."²¹ All life has been unbound at the unbinding of Prometheus. The Earth and the Moon in a long lyrical dialogue rejoice over "the joy, the triumph, the delight, the madness, the boundless, overflowing, bursting gladness, the vaporous exultation not to be confined,"²² and Demogorgon ends the poem with an address in praise of Prometheus:

20. Act III, 193-204.

21. Brock, A. Clutton -, Shelley: The Man and the Poet, p. 189.

22. Act IV, 319-321.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
 To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
 To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
 To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
 From its own wreck and thing it contemplates;
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
 This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
 This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory!²³

When Shelley wrote his Prometheus Unbound he had no intention that it be presented on the stage. The total absence of men and women in the piece make it entirely unsuited for production. He employed the form of the lyrical drama for the simple reason that the subject which he wished to treat was one that was unsuited to any other form of poetry, and similar to one which had been handled successfully in the dramatic form by Aeschylus. The myth as treated by the Greek dramatist, however, was far more successful dramatically speaking than was Shelley's.²⁴ Aeschylus humanized his characters; he reduced both Zeus and Prometheus to a scale in which they could be comfortably handled and dramatically foiled. Shelley dramatized the ideas of good and evil and made shadowy persons of them.

Aeschylus had the advantage over his English admirer, too, inasmuch as he told a tale that was already familiar to his audience. Shelley made the myth over to suit his own fancies and interpretation. These difficulties, together with the fact that it was naturally hard for Shelley to represent action -- especially

23. Act IV, 570-579.

24. Woodberry, op. cit., p. 161.

such actions as those with which he dealt in his Prometheus, combine further to make the drama impossible as a stage play. Clutton-Brock observes, not without reason, that whatever action there is in the drama belongs to a state of being about which no one knows or can know anything, that therefore the poem cannot be regarded as a drama, and "the question arises whether it has any form at all, or whether the plot is only a pretext for a number of separate poems."²⁵

The poem further offends classic dramatic form inasmuch as it disregards unity of character, time, and place. It begins with Prometheus, the Oceanides, and the Furies in Time and the Caucasus, and ends with the Earth and the Moon in Space and Eternity.

The play has a certain "cumulative power," however, which it derives from the emotions of the characters and which gives it dramatic power.

Shelley once said, "In poetry I have sought to avoid system and mannerism,"²⁶ and this principle is well exemplified in Prometheus Unbound. The style is free and varied, but not so free that it is not smooth and, on the whole, even. Clutton-Brock says, "Prometheus is nearer to music, than any other drama I know, and in form it is nearer a symphony than a drama!"²⁷ And Campbell,

25. Brock, Clutton; op. cit., pp. 190 ff.

26. Dowden, op. cit., II, p. 409.

27. Brock, Clutton-, op. cit., pp. 190 ff.

in his Shelley and the Unromantics, declares that the poem "contains some of the finest and strongest blank verse written since Shakespeare; and blank verse which is remarkably original."²⁸

Students of Shelley have been almost unanimous in according preeminence among his works to Prometheus. Oliver Elton calls it "the greatest of our esoteric dramas."²⁹ The Notebook of the Shelley Society observes, "For faithfulness and splendour of descriptive power the representation of the Alpine Valley in the 'Prometheus' stands alone in the poetry of savage and solitary nature."³⁰

Rossetti, in his Memoir of Shelley, eulogizes the work:

There is, I suppose, no poem comparable in the fair sense of that word, to Prometheus Unbound. The immense scale and boundless scope of the conception: the marble majesty and extra-mundane passions of the personages; the sublimity of ethical aspirations; the radiance of ideal and poetic beauty which saturates every phase of the subject, and almost (as it were) wraps it from sight at times, and transforms it out of sense into spirit; the rolling river of great sound and lyrical rapture; form a combination not to be matched elsewhere, and scarcely to encounter competition. . . It is the ideal poem of perpetual and triumphant progression -- the Atlantis of Man Emancipated.³¹

Woodberry, perhaps the greatest American student of Shelley says,

Prometheus Unbound best combines the various elements of Shelley's genius in their most complete expression, and unites harmoniously his creative power of imagination and his 'passion for reforming the world.' . . . It marks his full mastery of his powers. . . a poem of moral perfection of man and of spiritual ideality.³²

28. Campbell, op. cit., p. 203.

29. Elton, O., op.cit., p. 195.

30. Notebook of Shelley Society, Part I, p. 3.

31. Rossetti, William Michael, A Memoir of Shelley, p. 96.

32. Woodberry, op. cit., pp. 160-161.

Shelley himself considered the poem of a higher character than anything he had previously attempted -- it was "a poem," he wrote to Ollier, "in my best style . . . the most perfect of my productions."³³ And Trelawny records him as saying, "If that is not durable poetry, tried by the severest test, I do not know what is. It is a lofty subject, not inadequately treated, and should not perish with me. . . My friends say Prometheus is too wild, ideal, and perplexed with imagery. It may be so. It has no resemblance to the Greek drama. It is original; and cost me severe mental labor. Authors, like mothers, prefer the children who have given most trouble."³⁴

Campbell, however, asserts that the poem is not Shelley's best, and criticizes it because, he says, "It suffers from excess light; too many dawns and noons, too many flashing stars and shining dews; it suffers," he continues, "even from excess of philosophic truth. . . Shelley may have killed the Prometheus myth perhaps with too much truth." He admits, on the other hand, that the drama contains some impressive "though rather peculiar" character drawing, and some "magnificent dramatic touches"; that Prometheus is "one of the most convincing strong characters Shelley ever created; and that the poem remains "a work of audacious idealism and imaginative

33. Ibid., p. 161.

34. Ibid., p. 161.

daring, an abiding glory to a nation that has ever prided itself on strange and far adventure."³⁵

Prometheus Unbound will always stand as a monumental expression of humanitarianism. Its hero is loftier in his conception of liberty than any other titanic creation of poet or myth-writer in literature; even Milton's Satan is less magnificent.³⁶

35. Campbell, op. cit., pp. 203 and 207.

36. Salt, H.S., A Shelley Primer, p. 64.

B.

The Cenci.

Great God! that such a father should be mine!

I, ii, 54.

Students of Shelley have marvelled that he could turn almost immediately from the composition of the first three acts of the mythological and highly lyrical Prometheus Unbound to the strictly dramatic and unlyrical treatment of The Cenci; and, further, that he could, upon completing that intense tragedy, return again to the visions of the Prometheus and write the supremely metaphysical fourth act of it. With highly creative minds one effort seems sometimes to leave behind an impetus which must spend itself in another. Thus it was with Byron. No sooner had he finished his historical Sardanapalus with its classical form till he plunged into the composition of the metaphysical Cain, a lyrical drama.

While at Leghorn in the spring of 1818, Shelley had read a manuscript narrative of the appalling wrongs and the vengeance of Beatrice Cenci. On his arrival at Rome, he found that the story of the Cenci was universally known, and that it could not be mentioned in Italian society without awakening "a deep and breathless interest."¹ This profound interest in the story of horror suggested to Shelley the idea of its fitness for dramatic treatment. His

1. Shelley, Percy Bysshe, "Author's Preface" to The Cenci, in Woodberry, op. cit., p. 209.

enthusiasm in the subject was further roused when on April 22, 1819, the Shelleys visited the Colonna Palace where they saw Guido's portrait of Beatrice; and he began the drama at Rome on May 14 -- just five weeks after he had finished the third act of Prometheus. The greater part of the tragedy, however, was written at Leghorn, where he finished it in August.

Shelley composed the bulk of The Cenci, in a small, glass-covered terrace at the top of the Villa Valsovano which he and Mrs. Shelley had rented, but though the situation was a romantic one and though the scenery was beautiful, he allowed none of the charm of his surroundings to creep into the drama. "The Cenci is a work of art," he said; "it is not colored by my feelings nor obscured by my metaphysics."² The work owes more to his intense self-projection into the story which so profoundly interested him than to any other single influence.

Shelley frankly admitted that he intended the play for the stage, and he took "some pains to make it fit for representation."³ The work is unique among his compositions in that it is his one completed attempt in regular drama, that it has a restrained style, and that it is absolutely free from socialism and from abstract thought and imagery. "In writing the Cenci," he explained, "my object was to see how I could succeed in describing passions I

2. Woodberry, op. cit., p. 208.

3. Ibid., p. 207.

have never felt, and to tell the most dreadful story in pure and refined language."⁴

The central theme of The Cenci, the heroic resistance to tyranny, is typically Shelleyan. Sympathy with the oppressed was a constant factor in Shelley's temperament, and he made his revolutionary heroes and heroines, like himself, the victims of tyranny which permits them to conquer spiritually only at the expense of physical suffering that frequently ends in defeat. Prometheus endured a long season of torment, but was victorious both physically and spiritually in the end. Beatrice Cenci after suffering inexplicable wrongs is condemned to die, but her spirit remains as indomitable as that of Prometheus.

The story of the drama is a simple one. Count Cenci of Rome is at the height of a monstrous career of wickedness when the play opens, but no one seems to dare to oppose him. "I love the sight of agony," he says; and the Pope freely forgives him his many sins, because the count freely pays for the pleasure of committing them. Among other things, he hates his children. He exults when he hears of the death of two of his sons, and he plans an outrage against his daughter, more because he wishes to do her an intolerable wrong than because of an incestuous passion. After she has recovered from the shock and horror of his violence,

4. Ibid., p. 207.

Beatrice resolves to have her father murdered. In this resolution she is seconded by her mother and her brother and by the man who sets himself up as her lover. She hires two bravoos, who hate the Cenci, to commit the deed.

The papal legate arrives just after the Count's death with a commission for his execution in punishment for his crimes, but when it is discovered that he has been assassinated, his murderers are sought out to be delivered into the hands of justice. One of them dies fighting, but the other one is captured, and, under torture, he confesses that Beatrice has hired him to kill her father. Beatrice denies parricide, but the evidence against her is too strong and the Pope refuses to pardon her: she has destroyed one of his best sources of revenue. The play ends just before Beatrice, her mother, and her brother are to be executed. The girl's spirit is unbroken to the end.

Shelley lacked narrative ability -- the talent to develop plot connectedly. Unlike Byron, however, his deficiency was not in the fact that he was unable to bring out the tragical elements in his story or to develop his characters. In The Cenci he succeeded in depicting the supreme movements of struggle, but he was incapable of supplying the necessary intermediate links. Like Byron, he was more interested in what his characters felt and said than in the plot. Consequently, the chief interest of The Cenci lies in its characterization rather than in its presentation of action; and it is for the representation of its two chief characters

that it is especially notable. The play revolves about Count Cenci, wholly malicious and evil, and his daughter, entirely innocent and gentle. They represent Shelley's conception of deep-dyed corruption and spotless purity in conflict. The other characters, only weakly developed, serve as a contrast-background before which these two are portrayed in high relief.

There is little dramatic action as such in the first four acts of The Cenci, although there is a steady emotional development as in the Prometheus. The drama reaches its height in the last act when Beatrice, at bay before her judges, changes her attitude of patience and sorrow for one of cunning and defiance. Unlike the usual tragic heroine, she reacts towards the wrongs she has suffered by feelings divinely justified in striking down the criminal who has ruined her, because, she says, "my father's honour did demand my father's life." And one is quite willing to agree that her reasoning is not far wrong, for it would be difficult to find any character more abhorrent than Shelley's portrayal of Francesco Cenci. Accepting the Cenci tradition as he found it, Shelley painted the veteran voluptuary in unsoftened colors.

In writing The Cenci, Shelley avoided the "introduction of what is called mere poetry."⁵ He declared that there was not a lyrical phrase in the whole work which was there for its own sake,

5. Shelley, P.B., "Author's Preface" to The Cenci, in Woodberry, op. cit., p. 210.

and that he wrote the play "without an overfastidious and learned choice of words," because he felt that "in order to move men to true sympathy" it was necessary to "use the familiar language of men."⁶ The style of The Cenci, therefore, shows little of the author's usual radiant imagery. It is, instead, clear and simple -- a fact due to the brevity and simplicity of its sentence structure and to the unusual artistic self-control which Shelley exercised in writing it. It is direct, forceful, dignified; but it is also poetically impassioned. With the realistic terseness is combined an artistic idealism which characterizes nearly all of Shelley's works. The blank metre of the play is of a high quality, unusually even throughout.

Shelley did not observe the unities in the strict sense of the classicists or as faithfully as Byron did in his historical dramas, but he did compress the events of his plot into as brief a compass as could be done with plausibility. There is less unity of place, however, than of time. There are fifteen scene changes in The Cenci -- a fact which shows the influence of the Elizabethan dramas with which Shelley was very familiar.

In the composition of the play, he was governed not so much by the requirements of the actual stage for which he was writing and of which he knew so little, as by the examples of

6. Ibid., pp. 210, 211.

the older masters of the drama. The individual speeches of The Cenci are longer than those of either the Elizabethan or the romanticist plays, but in the general matter of form, Shelley was influenced by Shakespeare and his contemporaries; in his choice of subject, by the Greeks.

The Oedipus Tyrannus of Sophocles suggested to him the dramatic possibilities of the Cenci story.⁷ The incest motive upon which Oedipus is based appealed to Shelley's imagination. "Incest," he once said, "is like many other incorrect things, a very poetical circumstance."

He realized, however, that this motiv might make the play objectionable for presentation, but he felt that the delicacy with which he treated the subject would eliminate this objection. "My principal doubt as to whether it would succeed, as an acting play," he wrote to Peacock, "hangs entirely on the question, as to whether such a thing as incest in this shape, however treated, would be admitted on the stage. I think, however, it will form no objection, considering, first, that the facts are matter of history and, secondly, the peculiar delicacy with which I have treated it. . . I am exceedingly interested in the question of whether this attempt of mine will succeed or no. I am strongly inclined to the affirmative at present."⁸

7. Compare the use of soliloquy, the number of scenes, and the murder scene in The Cenci, with those of the Oedipus.

8. Shelley, P.B., as quoted by Woodberry, op. cit., p. 207.

But when he sent the play to Mr. Harris of Covent Garden, suggesting that Miss O'Neil and Edmund Kean should play Beatrice and Cenci, Mr. Harris refused to accept it on the grounds that its subject matter was objectionable for presentation. He not only refused to have Miss O'Neil take the role of Beatrice, but he would not even permit her to read the play.⁹

Shelley's enthusiasm for the work gradually waned. In a letter to Leigh Hunt to whom he had dedicated the play, he said, "I confess I did not expect it to be so successful with you, or with anyone, although it was written with a view to popularity, a view to which I sacrificed my own peculiar notions in a certain sort, by treating of any subject, the basis of which is moral error."¹⁰

Nevertheless Shelley was disappointed in the failure of The Cenci to meet the purpose for which he had designed it. It was the only one of his works from which he seems to have expected contemporary and popular success.¹¹ Yet the drama had a larger sale than any of his worth works except, perhaps, Queen Mab.¹² It was printed at Leghorn in 1819, and published in England in the spring of 1820; a second edition followed in 1821, a proof of popularity which none of Shelley's other poems achieved during his lifetime.¹³

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9. Woodberry, op. cit., p. 207.
 10. Campbell, op. cit. p. 290.
 11. Woodberry, op. cit., p. 208.
 12. Brock, Clutton -, op. cit., p. 171.
 13. Salt, H.S., Shelley Primer, p. 77.

Most students agree that The Cenci excels the contemporary tragedies of Byron and Coleridge, and the later dramas of Browning and Tennyson. Various nineteenth century critics called the play the greatest tragedy of modern times,¹⁴ others asserted that it was the greatest English tragedy since Shakespeare,¹⁵ and Swinburne went so far as to consider it "the greatest tragedy that has been written in any language for upwards of two centuries."¹⁶ Mrs. Shelley, who considered the fifth act of the play Shelley's masterpiece, remarked in her note to the play,

It is curious, to one acquainted with the written story, to mark the success with which the poet has inwoven the real events of the tragedy in his scenes, and yet, through the power of poetry, has obliterated all that would otherwise have shown too harsh or too hideous in the picture.¹⁷

And Leigh Hunt declared,

What a noble book, Shelley, you have given us! What a true, stately, and yet affectionate mixture of poetry, philosophy and human nature, and horror, and all-redeeming sweetness of intention, for there is an undersong of suggestion through it all, that sings, as it were, after the storm is over, like a brook in April.¹⁸

But if the play has had unqualified praise, it has also received unqualified condemnation. Many of the criticisms in con-

14. R.W. Griswold, 1875; Wm. M. Rossetti, 1878; R.P. Scott, 1878; H.S. Salt, 1887; and Wm. Sharp, 1887.

15. Geo. Griffin, 1845; Lady Shelley, 1858; and J.A. Symonds, 1879.

16. Swinburne, A.C. Miscellanies, p. 120.

17. Woodberry, op. cit., - 208.

18. Hunt, Leigh, Correspondence, I, p. 154.

temporary magazines were scathing in their denunciation of it. The Literary Gazette, for example, said,

Of all the abominations which intellectual perversion, and poetical atheism, have produced in our times, this tragedy appears to us to be the most abominable. . . The whole design, and every part of it, is a libel upon humanity; the conception of a brain not only distempered but familiar with infamous images, and accursed contemplation.¹⁹

Byron read the play and told Shelley, "Besides that I think the subject essentially undramatic, I am not an admirer of your old dramatists as models. . . Your Cenci, however, was a work of power and poetry."²⁰ Medwin admired the Cenci, but considered the dramatic form too opposed to Shelley's natural genius to have allowed him to do his best work in that field.²¹

From time to time after the publication of The Cenci, actors were attracted by the stage possibilities of the piece.²⁴ Not until 1886, however, was actual production carried out. The drama has not been attempted since.

On May 7, 1886, under the auspices of the Shelley Society, The Cenci, was performed before a select audience of over 2400 people. No money was taken at the doors; therefore, since it was not public in a legal sense of the word, no license was required for its presentation.²² For technical reasons the drama was divided

19. Literary Gazette, April 1, 1820, as quoted by Bates, E.S. op. cit., pp. 11-12.

20. Byron, Lord, Letter to Shelley, April 26, 1821, in Moore, op. cit., V, p. 151.

21. Medwin, Thomas, The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley, p. 349.

22. Bates, E.S., op. cit., p. 26.

into six acts instead of the original five, and the performance occupied four hours. The production, according to the Shelley enthusiasts, was a great success, but the theatrical critics disagreed, declaring that it was a failure on the English stage by reason of its length, its gruesome character, and its immorality. The following excerpt from The Times, Saturday, May 8, 1886, is an example of the general tenor of the journalistic criticism of the play:

That the language is vigorous, poetic, and noble may be allowed, none the less because certain passages recall Macbeth and Hamlet; but the dramatic elements of the story are not handled with the requisite skill to keep the nerves of the audience in a high state of tension. The action is without variety. It is blood-curdling, horrible, revolting even, but it is uniform, and, except in the case of Shelley's enthusiasts, weariness is apt at the end of the first hour or two to take the place of the shudders of disgust occasioned at the outset by the nameless deeds of Count Cenci. . . Its place in English literature remains what it was; but the Shelley Society may, if they are so disposed, claim to have effectually demolished its pretensions as a play.²³

The Daily Telegraph remarked, "Four long hours of a lovely May afternoon were yesterday occupied by the Shelley Society in laboriously proving the worthlessness of The Cenci for all practical stage purposes."²⁴ And The Morning Post observed that "The place for The Cenci in these days is not the stage, but the library shelf."²⁵ Even the more lenient

23. The Times, Saturday, May 8, 1886, as quoted by The Notebook of the Shelley Society, I, p. 54.

24. Daily Telegraph, Saturday, May 8, 1886, as quoted by The Notebook of the Shelley Society. I, p. 55.

25. Morning Post, Saturday, May 8, 1886, as quoted in The Notebook of the Shelley Society, I, p. 56.

critics of the work, while praising it, denied its place as a stage play, although a few believed that, if properly cut, it would rival Shakespeare's productions.²⁶

The estimate of E.S. Bates, who has made a thorough study of the drama, is perhaps as sound as any that has yet been made. He says,

A great literary drama The Genci remains after all, and one that will not be forgotten. Inadequate of structure as it is, and hampered by its subject-matter, with scenes of declamation where scenes of action are needed, and scenes of action without proper relation to those which precede or follow, now too lingering in its movement, now too hasty, now belonging to one type of play, now to another, too voluble for the stage, too realistic for the closet, -- when all these faults have been realized and inscribed in our thought, there still remains on the other side the clear consciousness of a great dramatic struggle, shown to us in its essential human significance, an exhibition of the basest and loftiest characteristics of mankind.²⁷

26. Notebook of the Shelley Society, I, p. 101.

27. Bates, E.S., op. cit., p. 63.

Oedipus Tyrannus
or
Swellfoot the Tyrant

The circumstances which gave rise to the composition of Shelley's next drama were very different from those which inspired the production of The Cenci, and the resulting work was as inferior in quality to that play as it was unlike it in form and substance. Oedipus Tyrannus, or Swellfoot, the Tyrant, is a piece of sheer drollery, a "mere plaything of the imagination,"¹ -- and it shows its author at his poorest.

Shelley, always the consistent enemy of oppression in all forms, became absorbed in the movements in favor of national independence which were beginning to agitate the South of Europe in 1819. The temporary success of the revolutionists in Spain early in the spring called forth his glorious "Ode to Liberty," a poem which, strangely enough, gave rise to the afore-mentioned Oedipus Tyrannus, a composition of a very different character.

Early in August the Shelleys removed to the Baths of San Giuliano where, not long after, a friend came to visit them on a day when a fair was being held in the square beneath their windows. During the course of the day Shelley undertook to read his noble ode to the visitor, but his reading, ludicrously accompanied by the grunting of pigs for sale at the fair in the street below, inspired the

1. Shelley, Mrs., Note to Oedipus Tyrannus, as quoted by Woodberry, op. cit., p. 283.

merriment rather than the admiration of the group to whom he was reading. The poet himself entered into the humor of the situation and suggested that the sound was not unlike the chorus in The Frogs of Aristophanes.

One ridiculous association suggested another, and he conceived the notion of using the pig chorus in a mock tragedy reflecting on the political disturbances of the day in England. The burlesque "Swellfoot" was the result. When it was finished, the drama was sent to England where it was printed and published anonymously. It was immediately stifled, however, when the Society for the Suppression of Vice, alarmed by its political implications, demanded its withdrawal.

The situation on which Shelley based his burlesque was a famous scandal of current interest at the time. Princess Caroline, the notorious wife of George IV of England, on hearing of her husband's accession to the throne, returned from her unconventional wanderings on the continent, whither she had gone some years before when the dissolute George had deserted her, to claim her royal rights. The King not only refused to acknowledge her claims, but instituted proceedings for a divorce in the House of Lords. The royal dispute, repulsive and ridiculous, disgusted the people of England. Popular sympathy was on the side of the Queen, not because of any belief in her innocence, but because of the general contempt for the King.

Shelley's drama was intended to ridicule the prosecution of Queen Caroline, and in it he depicted George IV as Swellfoot the Tyrant, the gouty monarch of Thebes, and represented

the English populace as the chorus of the swinish multitude.

The play opens with the vain entreaties of the chorus of swine to Swellfoot for redress and food. Purganax (Lord Castlereagh) and Mammon enter, discussing an obscure oracle relating to the entry of the Queen on a Minotaur. The King's ministers have tried by force and fraud to repress the popular enthusiasm for her return, but with no success. The Queen arrives, but meanwhile Mammon suggests a scheme, the Green Bag test, by which her condemnation can be secured.

The test is accepted by the swine and the Queen, and the trial takes place in the Temple of Famine. As the contents of the Green Bag are about to be poured on the Queen, she snatches it from her persecutors and empties the contents on the King and his whole court, all of whom are instantly changed into filthy and ugly animals. The image of Famine, which has been hovering over a heap of bones and loaves in the background, disappears. The swine hungrily devour the loaves and are changed into bulls. A Minotaur (John Bull) appears, and the Queen rides away triumphant.

The two-act "tragedy" is grotesque in style, and its wit, though occasionally droll, is on the whole cumbersome and unnatural. Shelley the satirical humorist lacked the inspired genius of Shelley the ethereal lyricist.

Most critics look upon the Swellfoot as a failure. Oliver Elton calls it "dismal and unreadable";² Dowden observed that its

2. Elton, Oliver, op. cit., p. 202.

author "lacked that robust humour which can discover sources of mirth and satire in the gross stuff of life";³ even Rossetti, the Shelley enthusiast, admits that he "appears a little out of his groove" in Oedipus Tyrannus;⁴ and Mrs. Shelley hesitated to published the piece with his other works because she wondered, "whether it would do honor to Shelley."⁵

It must be remembered, however, that the work was not meant to be considered a serious effort and therefore should not be criticized too harshly. Yet, notwithstanding the frivolity of it, the burlesque "breathes that deep sympathy for the sorrows of humanity, and indignation against its oppressors, which make it worthy of Shelley's name."⁶

3. Dowden, op. cit., II, p. 345.

4. Rossetti, op. cit., p. 99.

5. Shelley, Mrs., note to Oedipus Tyrannus, as quoted by Woodberry, op. cit., p. 283.

6. Ibid., p. 284.

D.

Hellas

The world's great age begins anew,
 The golden years return,
 The earth doth like a snake renew
 Her winter weeds outworn;
 Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam,
 Like wrecks of a dissolving dream. (1060-1065).

Two years elapsed before Shelley again used the dramatic medium for the expression of his thoughts and passions, and the resulting composition, "a sort of imitation of the Persae of Aeschulus,"¹ is as serious and dignified as his Oedipus Tyrannus, suggested by The Frogs of Aristophanes, is satirical and ridiculous.

Revolutionary movements of the sort which had inspired "The Ode to Liberty" were still rife in Southern Europe in 1821. Spain, in arms against the tyranny of Ferdinand VII, had been a signal to the independence-loving people of Italy. Secret societies, "Carbonari," with which Byron was actively associated and in which Shelley was deeply interested, were organized. Naples rose in insurrection against the dynasty of the Bourbons. Piedmont, Genoa, Massa, and Carrara asserted their freedom. While these revolutions were at their height the Austrian army poured into the peninsula, and further struggles ensued. Shelley was fascinated by the turmoil on every hand, and regarded the conflicts as "decisive of the destinies of the world," probably for centuries to come."²

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1. Shelley, P.B., Letter 431, to John Gisbourne, October 22, 1821, in Ingpen, R. (ed.) Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, II, p. 920.
 2. Shelley, Mrs., Note to Hellas, as quoted by Woodberry, op. cit., p. 317.

Meanwhile the news of another revolution aroused his interest in another quarter. Greece was on the point of proclaiming its independence of Turkish misrule -- a fact which excited the warmest sympathies of Shelley whose mind was richly stored with the history, philosophy, and literature of that classic land. His zeal in the cause of the country was stimulated further by his friendship with the exiled Greek prince Mavrocordato who later became a leader in the Hellenic revolution.

Hellas, a poetic version of the delivery of Greece, "was written in a moment of enthusiasm,"³ in the fall of 1821. Shelley sent it to his publisher on November 11, requesting him to publish it at once, because, he pointed out, "what little interest this poem may ever excite, depends upon its immediate publication."⁴ The work appeared early the next year, the last of his poems given to the world before he died.

Though professing to deal with contemporary events, Hellas, is, in essence, an idealized description in poetry of the world's passion for liberty -- a visionary forecast as rich in hope and humanitarianism as is the Prometheus. Like Prometheus it contains the actual symbol of that which yet may be -- which must be -- if man's progress is to be an upward one, making for the increased love of his kind. Its theme is the regeneration of mankind, a regeneration which will come about in spite of the melancholy forboding of the horrors

3. Shelley, P.B., Letter 453, to John Gisborne, April 10, 1822, in Ingpen, R., op. cit., II, p. 953.

4. Shelley, P.B., Letter 432, to Charles Ollier, November 11, 1821, in Ingpen, R., op. cit., II, p. 921.

that the struggle must cost.

After a magnificent though fragmentary prologue in which the Herald of Eternity, Christ, Satan, Mahomet, and a Chorus consider the present and the future state of Greece, and Christ prophesies that Greece shall rise "victorious as the world arose from Chaos," the drama proper begins.

The scene is laid in Constantinople. While a chorus of Greek captives sing of their hope of freedom, the Sultan, sleeping, dreams of impending danger. When he awakes he summons for consultation a Jewish interpreter of dreams. In the meantime one messenger after another comes with news of disasters, and the Sultan realizes that his empire is on the verge of ruin. His fears are confirmed when the Jewish dream interpreter, who is also a wizard, enables him to divine the impending destruction by raising his "imperial shadow" from the phantom-world, -- a device reminiscent of the calling forth of the phantasm of Jupiter in Prometheus Unbound, -- and when he hears voices proclaiming the victory and freedom of the Greeks. The piece concludes with a glorious song of freedom, the noblest example in all Shelley's poetry of his command of a classic simplicity and close-knit strength of speech.⁵

Shelley called his composition a lyrical drama.

"The subject in its present state," he said, "is insusceptible of

5. Cambridge History, XII, p. 83.

being treated otherwise than lyrically, and if I have called this poem a drama from the circumstance of its being composed in dialogue, the license is not greater than that which has been assumed by other poets who have called their productions epics, only because they have been divided into twelve or twenty-four books."⁶ Later he spoke of the poem as "a sort of lyrical, dramatic nondescript piece of business,"⁷ a phrase which is, indeed, quite descriptive of the work.

Unlike the usual drama, Hellas is not divided into acts. It is really a prolonged lyric, conveyed partly through dialogue and partly through choric songs. In its general form, it is based on the Persae of Aeschylus, which was a triumph-song inspired by the defeat of the Persians at Salamis; but the uncertainty of the outcome of the Greek struggle forbade Shelley to conclude the drama with a catastrophe parallel to the return of Xerxes and the desolation of the Persians. He therefore contented himself, as he put it, "with exhibiting a series of lyric pictures and with having wrought upon the curtain of futurity, which falls upon the unfinished scene, such figures of indistinct and visionary delineation as suggest the final triumph of the Greek cause as a portion of the cause of civilization and social improvement."⁸

G.B. Smith, commenting on the work in his critical biography of Shelley, says, "It is the grand capacity of going out of himself, and becoming not only the patriot of his own nation but

6. Shelley, P.B., "Author's Preface" to Hellas, in Woodberry, op. cit., p. 318.

7. Shelley, P.B., Letter 456, to Horace Smith, April 11, 1822, in Ingpen, op. cit., II, p. 958.

8. Shelley, P.B., "Author's Preface" to Hellas, in Woodberry, op. cit., p. 319.

a citizen of the world, which makes the poet's song so deathless, and covers him with fadeless glory in the eyes of posterity."⁹ And W.M. Rossetti enthusiastically asserts, "The poet, the scholar, the zealot of liberty, speak with one trumpet-tone in Hellas."¹⁰

At this point, it might be of some interest to compare Shelley's attitude towards the Hellenic cause with Byron's view of the same movement. Shelley's passionate interest in the revolution sprang from an idealist philosophy, and he resolved to adopt an optimistic belief that Greece would triumph. The fifth stanza of the majestic chorus that concludes the drama voices this conviction:

Another Athens shall arise,
And to remoter time
Bequeath, like sunset to the skies,
The splendor of its prime;
And leave, if nought so bright may live,
All earth can take or Heaven can give.

Byron was no less stirred by the Greek revolution than was Shelley; indeed, he was much more actively concerned in it. However, he did not entertain as high hopes for the struggling little country. In his lyric "The Isles of Greece" written in 1821, the same year in which Shelley composed Hellas, the Byronic strain of pessimism predominates. He expresses a longing for the freedom of Greece, but he lacks Shelley's confidence that freedom is inevitable. The following stanza, the most frequently quoted one in the entire poem, shows Byron's view:

9. Smith, G.B., Shelley: A Critical Biography, p. 140.

10. Rossetti, op. cit., p. 109.

The mountains look on Marathon --
 And Marathon looks on the sea;
 And musing there an hour alone,
 I dreamed that Greece might still be free;
 For standing on the Persians' grave,
 I could not deem myself a slave.

The two lyrics are written in the same metre, but the mood and style of neither indicates influence on the other.

Aside from its lofty theme, Hellas derives its chief interest from its beautiful poetic quality. It lacks sufficient dramatic incident to be great from a dramatic point of view. The concluding chorus, for example, -- perhaps the best impersonal lyric Shelley ever wrote,¹¹ -- is certainly not a characteristic or even desirable ending for a drama.

Critics are almost unanimous in praising Hellas for its poetical purity. Mrs. Shelley had a deep regard for the poem. In her note on the work, she said,

Hellas was among the last of his compositions, and is among the most beautiful. The choruses are singularly imaginative, and melodious in their versification. There are some stanzas that beautifully exemplify Shelley's peculiar style. . . .

The conclusion of the last chorus is among the most beautiful of his lyrics; the imagery is distinct and majestic; the prophecy, such as poets love to dwell upon, the regeneration of mankind -- and foregone time, from which it inherits so much of intellectual wealth, and memory of past virtuous deeds, as must render the possession of happiness and peace of tenfold value.¹²

11. Cambridge History, XII, p. 83.

12. Shelley, Mrs., Note to Hellas, in Woodberry, op. cit., p. 318.

Rossetti, with characteristic fervor, declared that the poem contains "especially in its lyrical choruses, many passages than which neither Shelley nor the English language has anything much better to show."¹³

As a play, however, it is nothing. Its characters and plot are not interesting in themselves, and it lacks form. The lyrics for which it is chiefly known form distinct units in themselves, and might well have been published separately.

13. Rossetti, op. cit., 109.

E.

Charles the First.

The subject of Shelley's next essay in drama was one which had been in his mind for some time, and one in which he saw great tragic possibilities. The contrast in the domestic and political character of Charles I, the stormy incidents of his reign, and the horribleness of its end, seemed to Shelley to offer a broad scope for the display of power, as well as the development of character, in all its variety.

He had no thought of attempting it himself, however, when in 1818 the story first suggested itself to his mind for dramatic treatment. He urged the subject on Mrs. Shelley, feeling that it was one better suited to her talents than to his own.¹ Towards the close of 1819, after he had successfully completed The Cenci, however, he adopted the subject of Charles the First himself, but, except that he asked Medwin to send him some material on the matter,² the project did not materialize then.

The idea began to take a more definite shape in his mind during the following summer. In July, 1820, he wrote to Medwin, "What think you of my boldness? I mean to write a play, in the spirit of human nature, without prejudice or passion, entitled Charles the First! So vanity intoxicates people, but let those few

1. Shelley, P.B., Letter 305, to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, September 22, 1818, in Ingpen, op. cit., II, p. 626.

2. Medwin, Thomas, as quoted by Woodberry, op. cit., p. 453.

who praise my verses, and in whose approbation I take so much delight, answer for the sin."³ But the immensity of the subject worried him, and it still lay dormant in his mind six months later when he confided to Ollier, "I doubt about 'Charles the First'; but, if I do write it, it shall be the birth of severe and high feelings. . .when once I see and feel that I can write it, it is already written. My thoughts aspire to a production of a far higher character; but the execution of it will require some years;"⁴ And in September he told his publisher, "Charles the First is conceived but not born. Unless I am sure of making something good, the play will not be written."⁵

The circumstance which, according to Clutton-Brock, finally persuaded him to undertake the composition of the drama, illustrates the poet's impulsively generous nature.⁶ For some time he had been urging Leigh Hunt to come to Italy, but Hunt was "like a helpless chick that expects food to be dropped into its open mouth," and Shelley was obliged to provide the funds for the transportation of the Hunt family from England, ^{and} for their establishment after they arrived in Italy. Shelley's own means at this time were limited, and when he set himself to writing the play he had meditated for so long a time it was for the purpose of raising money.

3. Shelley, P.B., Letter 374, to Thomas Medwin, July 20, 1820, in Ingpen, op. cit., II, p. 805.

4. Shelley, P.B., Letter 398, to Chas. Ollier, Feb. 22, 1821, Ibid., II, p. 857.

5. Shelley, P.B. Letter 916, to Chas. Ollier, Sept. 25, 1821, Ibid., II, p. 916.

6. Brock, A. Clutton, op. cit., p. 267.

He began writing the drama in January, 1822, but from the very beginning he found it "a devil of a nut to crack."⁷ Historical difficulties entangled him. He had no such passion for history as had Byron, and he even admitted once that he found it a duty to "attain merely to that general knowledge of it which is indispensable."⁸ Nevertheless he felt that the play, if completed, would hold a higher rank than The Cenci as a work of art.⁹

The task was an irksome one. It seems he could not adapt his moods and ideas to the dramatic form and do them justice. The work refused to take proper shape, and he felt discouraged with it. In April he wrote to a friend, "I have done some of 'Charles I;' but although the poetry succeeded very well, I cannot seize on the conception of the subject as a whole, and seldom now touch the canvas."¹⁰ By June he had given the work up. "I do not go with 'Charles the First,'" he wrote. "I feel too little certainty of the future, and too little satisfaction with regard to the past to undertake any subject seriously and deeply. I stand, as it were, upon a precipice, which I have ascended with great, and cannot descend without greater peril, and I am content if the heaven above me is calm for the passing moment."¹¹

A month later Shelley met his tragic death. The fragment of the play which had caused him so much worry and discontent was published posthumously, part of it by Mrs. Shelley, in 1824, and

7. Shelley, P.B., Letter 437, to Thomas Love Peacock, Jan. 11, 1822, in Ingpen, op. cit., II, p. 298.

8. Medwin, T., The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley, p. 341.

9. Shelley, P.B.? Letter 441, to Leigh Hunt, Jan. 25, 1822, in Ingpen op. cit., II, p. 933.

10. Shelley, P.B., Letter 453, to John Gisborne, April 10, 1822, in Ingpen, op. cit., p. 955.

11. Shelley, P.B.? letter to John Gisborne, June 18, 1822, in Ingpen, op. cit., p. 977.

the remainder by Rossetti in 1870.

As far as it goes, Charles the First is a striking piece of work, suggesting power that is almost Shakespearean in quality. The opening scene of the play, with the murmuring of the discontented citizens as they watch the Queen's masque passing through the streets, forbodes trouble. The King, kind by nature, but a slave to the wishes of the Queen and his ministers, is forced into tyrannous acts by their ambition and bigotry. Only Archy the Fool sees the impending danger, and, although his observations appear quite innocent and casual, they are nevertheless shrewd. He is, in fact, a very good imitation of the fool in Shakespeare's King Lear.

The fragment of the drama includes four scenes and a bit of a fifth. Shelley apparently had no definite plan in mind for the work, for the parts that he wrote lack the proper coherence and narrative force necessary in a play.

This evident lack of plan is probably one of the most important reasons why he did not finish Charles the First. Medwin suggests that it was impossible for him to make a villain of the King whom he looked upon as a slave of circumstance, a purist in morals, and an exemplary husband and father -- a character quite above the "lowminded, counterfeit patriots" and the Puritans whom he hated for their intolerance; and, further, that he could not reconcile his mind to beheading the King, because he did not believe in capital punishment.¹²

12. Medwin, op. cit., pp. 340 ff.

Mrs. Shelley expressed the opinion that the subject might have proved more difficult than he anticipated, or that perhaps "he could not bend his mind away from the broodings and wanderings of thought divested from human interest, which he best loved."¹³

The style of the fragment is, nevertheless, truly dramatic. The speeches, simple and direct in substance, are written in blank verse of a surprisingly even quality considering the fragmentary nature of the piece. The characters are, on the whole, well drawn, and show potentialities which, had he persevered in his task, might have made Charles the First a work as worthy of his genius as The Cenci.

The scanty fragment that is left to us, however, renders it hardly a fit object for criticism. C.H. Herford, writing in the Cambridge History of English Literature, declares that the piece shows "at moments, his advance in genuine dramatic power," and that "Charles and Henrietta are more alive than other characters with whom Shelley was in closer sympathy, and whom he could make the mouthpiece of his own animus and ideas."¹⁴

Oliver Elton believes that the abandoned drama is more "than the shattered limbs of a play" and that "the new promise of sculpturing power and dramatic style is undeniable."¹⁵ E.S. Bates,

13. Woodberry, op. cit., p. 453.

14. Cambridge History of English Literature, XII, p. 84.

15. Elton, O., op. cit., p. 219.

on the other hand, asserts that the five existing scenes of the play "bear little resemblance to the parts of a drama, and are merely interesting studies of successive groups of characters."¹⁶ But we shall never know how much Shelley might have made of the tragedy had he taken a whole-hearted interest in the project and finished it.

16. Bates, E.S., *op. cit.*, p. 99.

F.

The Fragments of an Unfinished Drama

Early in the spring of 1822, while he was struggling with his Charles the First, Shelley undertook a drama of an entirely different sort. He intended it to amuse his circle of friends at Pisa, and consequently meant it to represent a playful effort of the fancy rather than any laborious attempt in dramatic form. He composed only a small portion of it, however, and The Fragments of the Unfinished Drama are more fragmentary even than Charles the First.

Mrs. Shelley, in her note to the poem, sketched the story as far as "it had been shadowed out in the poet's mind":

An Enchantress, living in one of the islands of the Indian Archipelago, saves the life of a Pirate, a man of savage but noble nature. She becomes enamoured of him; and he, inconstant to his mortal love, for a while returns her passion: but at length, recalling the memory of her whom he left, and who laments his loss, he escapes from the enchanted island, and returns to his lady. His mode of life makes him again go to sea, and the Enchantress seizes the opportunity to bring him by a spirit-brewed tempest, back to her island.¹

Shelley wrote only two hundred forty-four lines of the fantasy.

The first short fragment of the play represents the Enchantress lamenting the departure of the Pirate whose life she has saved, and summoning a Spirit for the purpose of luring him

L. Woodberry, op. cit., p. 467.

back to her. The second fragment consists of a conversation between an Indian Youth and the Lady who is the Pirate's true love, and who is in quest of him on the island where she has been brought by a magic plant.

The pirate of the enchanted isle, probably inspired by Trelawny, "a wild but kind-hearted sea-man,"² who became one of Shelley's cricle of friends in January, 1822, does not once appear in person in the fantastic bit that has come down to us. H.S. Salt suggests that Shelley himself was the original of the Indian Youth.

Because it is so fragmentary, any effort to criticize the dramatic value of the piece is fruitless. As it stands, it is interesting only from a poetic point of view. The following lines from the lyrical speech of the Enchantress at the beginning of the first scene illustrate the beauty with which the fragments are fused:

He came like a dream in the dawn of life,
 He fled like a shadow before its nonn;
 He is gone, and my peace is turned to strife,
 And I wander and wane like the weary moon.
 O sweet Echo, wake,
 And for my sake
 Make answer the while my heart shall break!

The remainder of the piece is written in blank verse of a very uneven quality.

2. Shelley, P.B., as quoted by Campbell, op. cit., footnote, on p. 19.

G.

A Brief Estimate of Shelley's Dramatic Skill

When Shelley first turned to dramatic composition, he did it "to see what kind of a tragedy a person without dramatic talent could write." In the four years that followed, he proved no less than seven times that the stage was not his province. Although many of his admirers firmly believed that he had a dramatic potentiality which, had he lived longer and had opportunity to develop, would have one day "accomplished something worthy of the best days of theatrical literature,"¹ Shelley's seven attempts in dramatic work are sufficient evidence to the contrary. They illustrate only too well his great weaknesses as a dramatist: his weak hold on objective realities, and his want of narrative force.

Lyric writing came easily and naturally for him; dramatic writing did not. His passionately abstract nature could not easily adapt itself to the actualities with which plays, to be successful, must be devoted. Of his four completed plays, therefore, only one, The Cenci, is a pure drama, intended for stage production. Prometheus and Hellas are semi-lyrical. Oedipus Tyrannus, the two-act burlesque, can hardly be called a drama. The fragments of his three uncompleted plays bear little resemblance to the parts of a drama, and only serve to indicate his lack of interest in that sort of

1. Peacock, Memoirs of Shelley, p. 72.

literary activity.

The Cenci, however, proves that it was not impossible for him to confine himself to rule and to restrict his artistic style under the proper circumstances. But Shelley abhorred conventions and rules, and his theory of art forbade him conforming to a definite literary form. In Prometheus Unbound he allowed his imagination to rove at will. He drew figures too colossal to be animated with dramatic life; he disregarded form and unity; he interspersed lyrics at his pleasure, and allowed the story to take care of itself as best it might.

And he liked the Prometheus better than any other of his works, "Prometheus Unbound, I must tell you," he wrote to Collier, "is my favorite poem; I charge you, therefore, specially to pet him and feed him with fine ink and good paper. Cenci is written for the multitude, and ought to sell well. I think, if I may judge by its merits, the Prometheus cannot sell beyond twenty copies."²

The apparent ease with which he composed The Cenci notwithstanding the restricted form which he compelled himself to follow in writing it, was due to the fact that in it he happened upon a theme which illustrated perfectly his philosophy of life -- the theory of the hero resisting tyranny, no matter what the cost.

But when he tried to write a stage tragedy on the subject of Charles I, he found it wanting in the impelling interest the Cenci story had for him. After he had conceived the idea of writing it, he allowed at least a year to pass before he actually

2. Shelley, P.B., Letter to Mr. Collier, March 6, 1820, as quoted by Shelley, Lady, Shelley Memorials, p. 137.

began it; then, after working on it during the winter of 1821-1822 without even being able to finish one act to his satisfaction, he abandoned the plan entirely. The poetry of it "succeeded very well," but it seemed impossible for him to "seize on the subject as a whole."³

Shelley's want of narrative power is most strikingly illustrated by his other uncompleted plays, Tasso and The Unfinished Drama. Such portions of these pieces as remain are so small and sketchy that they occasion a doubt whether Shelley had any conception of plot or characters in mind. Even The Cenci shows that it was not easy for him to develop plot connectedly. As has been pointed out, the play has supreme scenes that might classify it as a truly great dramatic work, but it lacks the intermediary links necessary for the complete understanding of the progress of the story.

Nevertheless, despite his shortcomings in the art, Shelley succeeded in writing at least two, perhaps three, truly remarkable dramatic poems. Prometheus Unbound, as a sustained lyrical drama, has not been surpassed in the English language, and it may well be compared with its Aeschylean model. The Cenci has the masterly characterization and profound pathos of a great tragedy. And the Hellas, though wholly visionary and ideal throughout, is intensely alive and stirring in a dramatic way which makes it one of the supreme examples of the type of literature to which it belongs.

Shelley had proved that it was possible for a person without dramatic talent to write very fine dramas indeed, but not for the stage production.

3. Shelley, P.B., Letter 453, to John Gisborne, April 10, 1822, in Ingpen, op. cit., p. 955.

CHAPTER VI

Final Estimate of Byron and Shelley as Dramatic
Poets

The merits of Byron's and Shelley's dramatic works are not those which belong exclusively or even chiefly to dramatic literature. Both men lacked the technical equipment essential to writing for the stage, and both lacked narrative ability. Their talent, furthermore, was primarily lyric. Consequently, it is hardly fair to judge the compositions which we have been considering with reference to their dramatic worth only.

Aside from the fact that Byron's poetically impossible Werner attained an astounding success in the theatrical world and that Shelley's Prometheus has been accorded preeminence among lyrical compositions, the true value of the poets' dramas is two-fold: absolute, as regards content, and relative, in that they reveal certain traits of character in the poets which help towards the explanation of their lives and the understanding of their non-dramatic work.

Every drama of Byron and Shelley in some measure offers serious observations on life -- observations which are the expression of the poets' own philosophies. In Byron's plays the thought is concerned chiefly with the relation of man to his fellows and to his environment; in Shelley's the central theme is the inevitable conflict between good and evil; and the dramas of both depict the relation of man to nature and to the mysteries of the universe. Most of them,

however, lose much of their positive significance because the poets were incapable of treating the dramatic form adequately. Hence, their chief importance is in the fact that they illustrate certain characteristics of Shelley and Byron and certain conditions of the age.

The tendency of any drama is to absorb and then emanate personality, to draw out from its maker in some of its many opportunities what there is in him. The thoughts and moods of both Byron and Shelley, because of the highly subjective natures of the two men, may easily be known from their dramas.

When Byron exiled himself from England in 1816, he did so because his reputation in society was rapidly declining. He had been the social lion of the day, but when domestic troubles came to light and gave rise to certain tales concerning his conduct and morals, living in England became extremely unpleasant if not unbearable.

His reputation in literature, although still at its height, was soon to suffer a decline comparable to the decline in his social prestige. His readers in England carefully perused the works he sent from Italy and triumphantly searched out passages in them which they thought to reflect his profligacy and his radical views concerning society and religion. As a consequence, the criticism made by his English contemporaries of the work he produced during his years in Italy is, on the whole, somewhat biased. Certainly he was not the completely wicked character Jeffrey pictured

him in an article in the Edinburgh Review:

. . .he has exerted all the powers of his powerful mind to convince his readers, both directly and indirectly, that all ennobling pursuits, and disinterested virtues, are mere deceits or illusions, hollow and despicable mockeries for the most part, and, at best, but laborious follies. Religion, love, -- all are to be laughed at, disbelieved in, and despised; and nothing is really good, so far as we can gather, but a succession of dangers to stir the blood, and of banquets and intrigues to sooth it again!"¹

A study of Byron's plays reflects his character, but it does not show it as wholly evil. He was, as Bellamy in Byron the Man points out, "neither a peerless archangel or an unmitigated fiend."² His works abound in illustrations of how he was fascinated by the horrible, but they contain a few examples, too, of his ability to reach finer heights on occasion. In his dramas this influence is expressed in beautiful scenic descriptions and in much of the lyric verse of which some of them are largely composed. The pity of it is that the better moments come rarely and are sometimes almost completely submerged in melancholy. The historical plays, because of their gross subject-matter and because of their restricted classical form, are almost void of high poetic thought. Yet they show, as did all of his dramas, an underlying moral instinct and a sense of better things which could not remain unexpressed. He was, after all, only human -- a

1. Jeffrey, Essays from the Edinburgh Review, p. 129.

2. Bellamy, R.L., Byron the Man, p. 233.

man with very human passions, ambitions, emotions, and characteristics.

The reckless haste with which he wrote his dramas, for example, shows the impetuous energy of his nature. He prepared no plan beforehand and spent little or no time revising or retouching what he wrote. He attacked his subjects vigorously and animated them by the "electric force" of his own feeling.

Shelley, on the other hand, revised his dramas with some care. This is shown by the difference between the very fragmentary nature of his incompleted plays and the polished verse of the drama he finished.

The care which Shelley exercised in composing his pieces explains, in some measure, the superiority of his poetry to Byron's. Then too, because of his passionately abstract nature, Shelley maintained a thought level that Byron rarely, if ever, attained.

Shelley, like Byron, left England because conditions there made it extremely undesirable for him to remain. His reputation there as an atheist, a political radical, and an immoral character left nothing for him to lose by his departure. He had not yet attained any great degree of eminence as a poet; consequently, his verse, for lack of attention did not receive the censure that Byron's did. Much of his work, however, was regarded with suspicion by his English readers. They expected it to be atheistic, immoral, infamous. But Shelley was of too ethereal a temper to be cowed by criticism, and the optimism of his nature is reflected in his dramas just as truly as Byron's melancholy is shown in his.

Byron's insistent denial that he ever intended his plays for the stage illustrates his own egotism in that it indicates his apparent disdain for public approval, but it also shows by his dread of censure the extreme sensitiveness of his nature. Shelley, on the other hand, paid little heed to the criticisms of the public, and was quite frank in expressing his desire that The Cenci, the only play he wrote for production, be presented on the stage.

That both poets were very susceptible to influences is evidenced by the subjects which they chose for their plays and by their treatment of them. That they colored them with their own feelings is shown by the fact that their characters are little more than reproductions of their own personalities. Byron's heroes, like himself, are at once the victims and the masters of the world. Shelley's resemble their author in that they endure much suffering and conquer spiritually only at the expense of physical defeat.

Neither poet drew his characters after conventional patterns. Shelley's are idealized versions of his own ideas in conflict with eternal evil. Byron's are not ordinary good people unjustly persecuted; they are bad, to a greater or lesser degree, -- men and women in revolt against established authority.

Numerous other comparisons might be drawn between the characteristics of the two poets as revealed in their dramatic works. The examples here considered will suffice, however, to indicate the relative value of their plays in a study of Byron and

Shelley.

Although the dramas have little or no histrionic importance, they serve to indicate the genius of each of the poets in its entirety, and to illustrate and distinguish the personalities of the two men.

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